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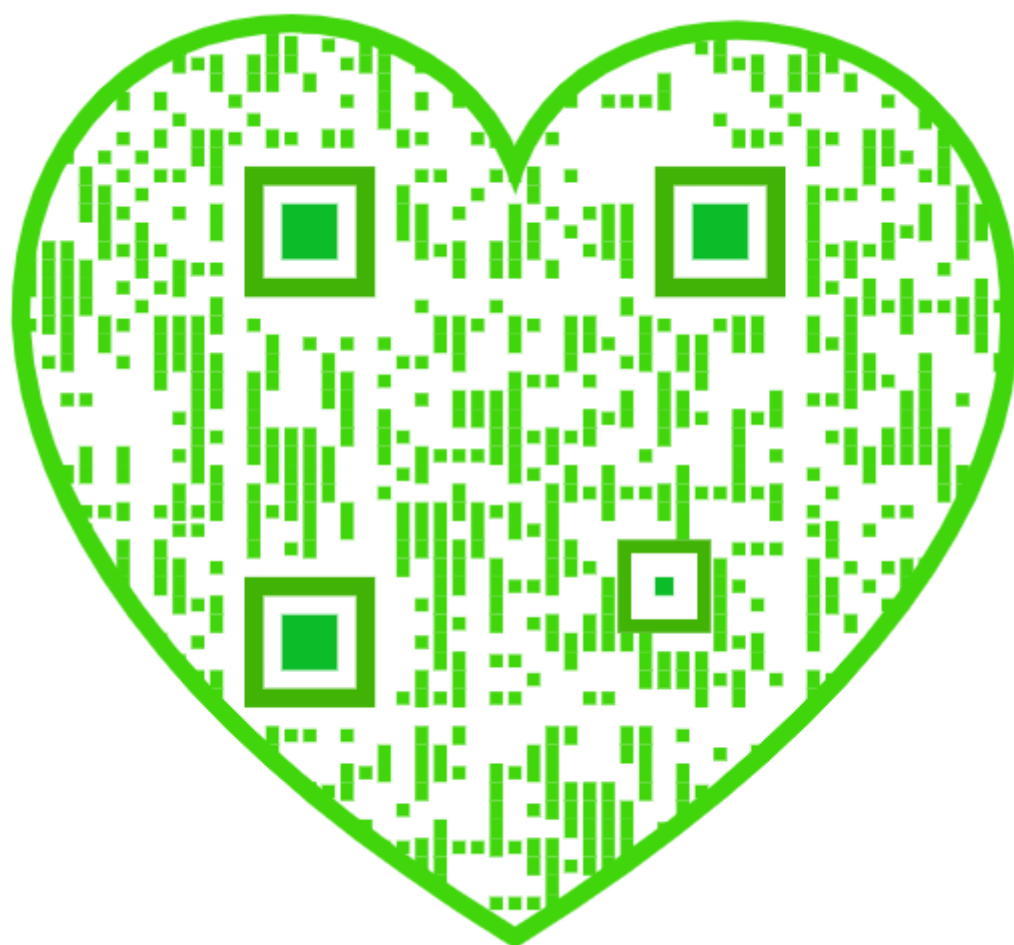
DUST BUSTERS

MEGA DEFENDER AND NEW
NOMAD GO WILD IN WALES



UNICORN!

FLAT OUT IN THE 33 STRADALE –
ALFA'S BLUE-SKY MASTERPIECE



LEXUS

LBX

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THE STAGE THAN THE ROAD

2X WHATCAR? WINNER

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car

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**Land Rover's Defender
Octa meets Ariel's
radically revised Nomad**

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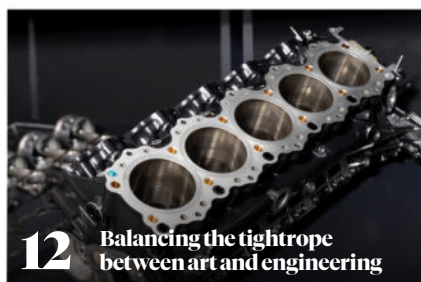


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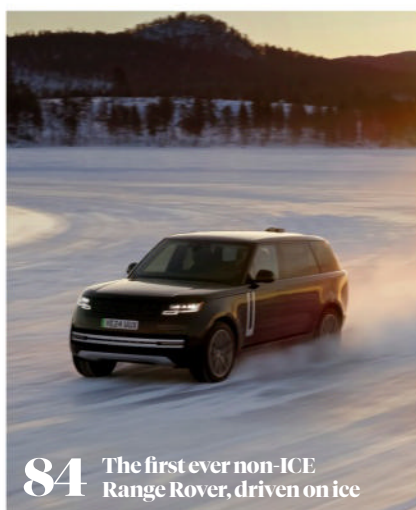
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Agenda



**GM is eyeing up
the potential for
expansion into
markets including
Europe and China**

► **A bit of Jaguar? Maybe.** Lotus overtones? Definitely. Neither have been the kind of inspiration you'd typically find in a Corvette; that whole-hearted, four-wheeled embrace of muscular Americana. But then this concept isn't a typical Corvette – or even very American.

It has been crafted by a 30-strong team of designers based in the UK, led by Julian Thomson – a key figure in modern British car design. As well as the Si Elise that shaped Lotus for a generation, Thomson had a hand in a string of handsome Jaguars including the XF, F-Type, F-Pace, i-Pace and even the radical CX-75. Thomson now works at General Motors, at its new European Advanced Design Centre in Leamington Spa. After a break following his departure from Jaguar, Thomson says he's 'having a much better time here than I was there.'

Not for the first time, GM is looking out from its North American heartland and eyeing up the potential for expansion into markets including Europe and China. The plan is to do this with cars that have more global appeal than the current line-up.

The role of Thomson and the Leamington Spa team in all this is not to produce the next generation of GM cars. It's to look even further ahead. 'The value of the Advanced

Badge riffing
on flags logo
glows on
the steering
wheel

D E S I G N

2025's prettiest new concept is... a Corvette

Jake Groves News editor



Design Centre is that you allow designers to think differently, get them to be a bit controversial or contrary to the mainstream,' says Michael Simcoe, senior vice president of GM Design (who will retire in July). 'In our design world you can, if you're not careful, create an echo chamber and just start talking to yourself all the time. It's nice to have an alternative opinion that allows you to step back and talk about what you're doing.'

And the reason for setting the centre in the UK, and not somewhere else in Europe? In part, the answer is Julian Thomson. 'Would we have set it up here without him? Probably,' Simcoe tells CAR. 'But there was a huge desire to do it here rather than in somewhere like Germany where GM has played before. It worked out well for both of us to have Julian to set up a studio here.'

Basing the centre in Leamington Spa has practical uses, too. The Coventry and Birmingham region is where a huge proportion of the UK's automotive expertise is based, with a wealth of suppliers, engineers and designers already active within a 20-mile radius of the new GM hub. 'There's a whole series of workshops and suppliers here who do milling and painting and all the messy tasks you don't really want to do in the studio,' says Thomson.

But why not somewhere more gritty and edgy? Nissan's European design centre, led by Matt Weaver, is based in Paddington, for example. 'I mean, have you been to Paddington?' says Thomson, clearly not envious of that cramped urban environment. 'When they want to actually look at the car, they have to take it up to Cranfield [Nissan's European technical centre in rural Bedfordshire] to see designs from a distance – getting to see a design from a distance away is really important.'

The first tangible result from Thomson's new UK-based design studio is this concept. It's Corvette-badged but otherwise unnamed, and gives off a very different vibe from the relatively accessible sports cars that have made Corvette such an enduring name, dating back to 1953. Instead, the concept gives the vibe of a glamorous, exclusive hypercar.

As well as this clean, aerodynamically focused coupe, we're given glimpses of how it could also look as a roadster or track-only racecar.

Thomson talks of how he and his team went 'back to basics' with this vision, which – we're told explicitly – is not an early preview of how the C9 generation of Corvette will look. Instead, it's all about the big picture, and imagining how one of the most recognisable American car brands can be shaped in the years, even decades, to come.

'There's no doubt that Corvette is strong enough to do other things that stretch the brand,' says Thomson.

It's low and wide, with sharp design elements including headlights integrated into the front splitter and suspension components exposed for all to see. It takes aerodynamics to a new level compared to any production Corvette, featuring fan-assistance like a Gordon Murray Automotive T.50. Enormous air channels under the car feed the fans, and the bodywork features deployable ►

Split rear window
is classic Corvette



wings for track use. You sit low, like in a racecar.

The sculpted shape and vast air outlets come together to create something the GM design team call Aero-Duality. 'The duality is all about increasing efficiency in road mode by reducing drag, but then increasing downforce in track mode,' says Dominic Najafi, head of exterior design at the GM Europe studio. 'That's something that we think is really part of the Corvette experience – how it can be used on both road and track.'

But where else is the Corvette-ness, besides its readiness for road and track use? The GM team concurs that the influences are subtle, yes, but deliberate. Simcoe and Thomson, for instance, point to that ridge splitting the front and rear windows, which acts as a visual spine for the whole car (two can play that game, Bugatti...) and is a nod to the beautiful Corvette Stingrays of the '60s. That and the ultra-minimalist version of the crossed flags logo on the nose and steering wheel.

Without those, though, this could be a seven-figure hypercar from a start-up, no?

'More than the details, it's about the confidence,' says Thomson. 'There is this heroism about it. Confidence in technology and how it can be packaged in such a way. Think of America in general; it's all about the entertainment, and it's always going to be loud.' Albeit figuratively, given this concept runs on electric power.

This marks the first of a handful of Corvette concepts that will be revealed over the next few months; other GM

Without the minimalist Corvette badge, this could be a seven-figure hypercar from a start-up

design centres in North America, China and Korea have been working to similar briefs and will reveal their own concepts before the end of 2025. Explaining the reasoning for creating these concepts, Thomson says: 'It comes down to this thing about when you buy an exotic sports car – you want to be part of the tribe, and you want to know what's going on. You want confidence in the car you're buying that it's good, and that the brand is going to get even better in the future.'

'You'll get a spectrum of different ideas [from the different studios] but they'll all broadly say the same thing: that GM is bloody good at design, and Corvette is a fantastic brand to be associated with.'

Simcoe acknowledges that there is a balance to be struck between exploring wild possibilities at one extreme and sticking too close to the familiar at the other end of the spectrum; not everything from a forward-looking design studio is going to be a winner. 'But with Julian coming in and building his team... they know each other very well and have instantly produced great results,' he says. 'The first real job they got into was this Corvette, and the results are spectacular.'



NEW BRAND

BYD's Denza is here to bulldoze the Germans

Curtis Moldrich Digital editor

► **'Ten times better than the competition.'** No, really: that's what BYD's European boss Stella Li says about the Z9 GT – the first car from the Chinese giant's Denza sub-brand to reach Europe.

For those following BYD's automotive empire, Denza will sit above the high-volume BYD-branded range, but below its ultra-luxurious Yangwang offering. To complicate matters further, Denza will sit alongside BYD's off-road-orientated Fangchengbao brand.

And we'll get this bit of branding cringe out of the way now: Denza is an acronym for the brand's key values: Diverse, Elegance, Novel, Zenith and Aspirational. The marketers will have loved making that one.

Denza started as a joint venture between BYD and Mercedes-Benz, with the split originally 50/50 until Mercedes got cold feet after sales got off to a dismal start. It then downgraded its holding to 10 per cent, with BYD

Crab-walking
Z9 GT is
Denza's first
car for Europe

taking a controlling share of 90 per cent. Then last September Mercedes withdrew completely. And that seems to have given Denza the confidence to attack the inventor of the car on its home turf.

Denza aims to combine style, technology and value to overturn the establishment. The style part is taken care of by ex-Alfa, Lamborghini and Seat designer Wolfgang Egger, who in the Z9 GT has created a car that looks a lot like the Porsche Panamera in detailing and proportions, although as far as Egger is concerned its styling evokes 'silk falling naturally onto a body'.

The first of at least six cars to launch in Europe wearing the Denza name, the Z9 is already on sale in China as both a shooting brake and three-box saloon; BYD's data suggests the shooting brake will do better in Europe. It's available as an EV and a plug-in hybrid. The EV is far from slow, taking 3.4 seconds to hit 62mph from a standstill. Using a 100kWh battery, 308bhp front motor and a pair of 322bhp rear motors it produces 952bhp.

And the car comes with tech the Germans don't offer very often, if at all; powered doors, for example, are included. Our time behind the wheel of the Z9 meant we got to see the Z9 GT perform some of its other functions, including a crab walk and a mode in which it can 'swing' into parking spaces, using the rear-wheel steering and torque-vectoring tech.

Value is the final part of the equation, despite Denza's relatively upmarket positioning. CAR understands Denza will not overlap with BYD-branded products on price – the cheapest Denza will cost more than the most expensive BYD – but it'll offer a punchy spec sheet compared to its premium competition.

Taking on the European luxury heartland means Denza will face some very well entrenched competition, in a market where it will need more than just advanced technology to succeed. Li isn't worried; she tells CAR: 'I think to sell BYD cars is simple. Just bring all the competition cars in the test track.'

As well as saying the Z9 is '10 times better' than the competition, she adds: 'We have a lot of unique features the other legacy brands do not have.'

'We're bringing a very technologically advanced model, and then we'll build up a very strong aftersales service,' she says. 'This gives people confidence. BYD is a long-term player, and we will always be here, to service them any time, waiting for them.'

Denza will operate in Europe as a separate entity to its parent brand: it'll be sold via a different dealer network, backed up by bespoke marketing and sales teams.

'The Denza brand has European influence at its heart, and we are confident that buyers will find distinctive, unique appeal in the car's mix of sophisticated, elegant design, strong performance and astounding technology,' says Li, speaking at the brand launch during Milan's design week.

'This model is a defining example of what the brand strives to achieve; this makes it the perfect choice to lead Denza into Europe.'

NEW CARS

Going up in the world

Jake Groves News editor



'I wish I was cool'

► **Seoul meets Malibu with the** latest concept from Genesis. This is the X Gran Convertible – a grandiose, two-door, four-seat boulevard cruiser based on the G90 luxury saloon that usually ferries board members around the South Korean capital. Like the colour scheme? Designers say it's inspired by the deep red hues of a tasty Cabernet Sauvignon, and there's also a two-door coupe version. Genesis definitely needs to generate a bit of excitement, and this may help, although whether there's enough cool associated with the Hyundai group's luxury brand to make a hit of any production version is debatable.



'I wish I was popular'

► **Nissan is desperate for some** of the loving Renault's been getting for its new 5 EV, so the Japanese partner brand has taken the path of least resistance and used the 5 as the basis for the next Micra. Expect all the tech to be the same: a choice of two battery packs, three e-motor options across Europe, AI-enabled infotainment and vehicle-to-grid charging capability. Nissan says the look comes from its European design centre in Paddington, and is inspired by the racy 20-23 concept. Is it enough to help turn around Nissan's fortunes? This, plus a new Leaf and a new Juke by the end of next year should help.



'I wish I was faster'

► **Skoda doesn't stick its vRS** performance badge on many cars, so its appearance on the Elroq, the smaller of its electric SUVs, was quite a surprise. But it makes sense in the context of the VW Group, where the same MEB platform is used to similar warm-to-hot effect on a high-powered version of the Audi Q4 e-Tron and a variety of GTX-badged electric Volkswagens. Those sharp lines and squat stance make the Elroq vRS look the part better than any VW or Audi on the same underpinnings. With 335bhp this promises to be the quickest production Skoda ever, and capable of 340 miles on a charge.



'I wish I could start again'

► **You remember when the production** Ioniq 6 arrived and everyone said it didn't look as good as the concept? It turns out that 'everyone' included Simon Loasby, and since he's Hyundai's senior vice president and head of the design studio he's actually in a position to do something about it. 'We look at this and think: "Why didn't we do this design in the first place?" Time helps you sometimes, and sometimes you carry baggage,' he says. The facelifted version gets a much cleaner face and fewer fussy details lower down. The update introduces a new N-Line, paving the way for a full-fat N coming in the summer.



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EPIC ENGINES

Honda's selling the family silver

Jamie Turner Professor of mechanical engineering

► **Ahead of its hotly anticipated** next step in Formula 1 as supplier of an all-new engine to Aston Martin, the Honda Racing Corporation is taking the opportunity to remind the world of some of its mind-blowingly inventive successes of the past (while glossing over its many misfires).

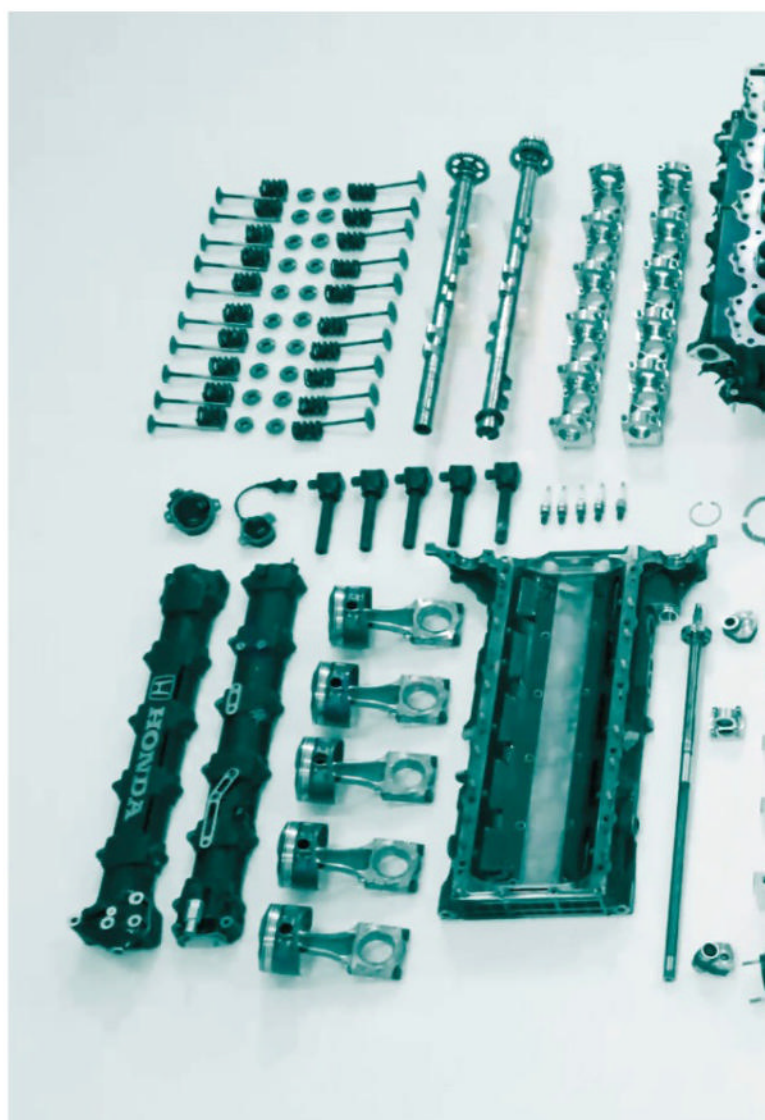
HRC is selling off camshafts, cam covers, pistons, con-rods and other genuine bits of old F1 cars, including the mighty RA100E V10 (pictured right) used by Ayrton Senna and Gerhard Berger in 1990, starting with an auction in August at Monterey Car Week. There will also be some more affordable items, such as signed merchandise.

The auctions and sales will doubtless be a good earner for HRC, but I'm prepared to take Honda's words at face value: it's a philanthropic act so that enthusiasts have a chance to own part of a significant racing machine. After all, we've been able to buy used components from other F1 engines for years – you don't need to go far into eBay to find valves and pistons from Cosworth DFVs.

There's a glorious back catalogue for Honda to nibble away at. It vows that the disassembly work will be done by HRC employees, in some cases those who built them in the first place. And the project won't immobilise those historic cars and bikes that are occasionally used for demonstration runs, it reassures us.

HRC was originally the bike racing arm, but Honda's four-wheeled motorsport projects have used the name for a while now, and recently it also absorbed Honda Performance Development, the US racing division. Honda has created some epic things in the F1 arena – for example the turbo V6s from the '80s, or the later V10s. The RA168E V6 that powered Senna's McLaren to the World Championship in 1988 was an absolute monster, having been built specifically for the FIA's reduced boost and fuel limits of that year, where many others just detuned their existing engines. Honda's decision to go the extra mile was vindicated: with its balance of power and fuel economy, the RA168E strode off into the distance.

The following year's RA109E V10 was similarly dominant – but, as incredible as it is to write this now, it was considered a really odd layout. V10s were out of favour, with everyone else apart from Renault using V8s or a V12; both engine makers had done some serious homework to get there. Somehow, the V12 family that Honda followed

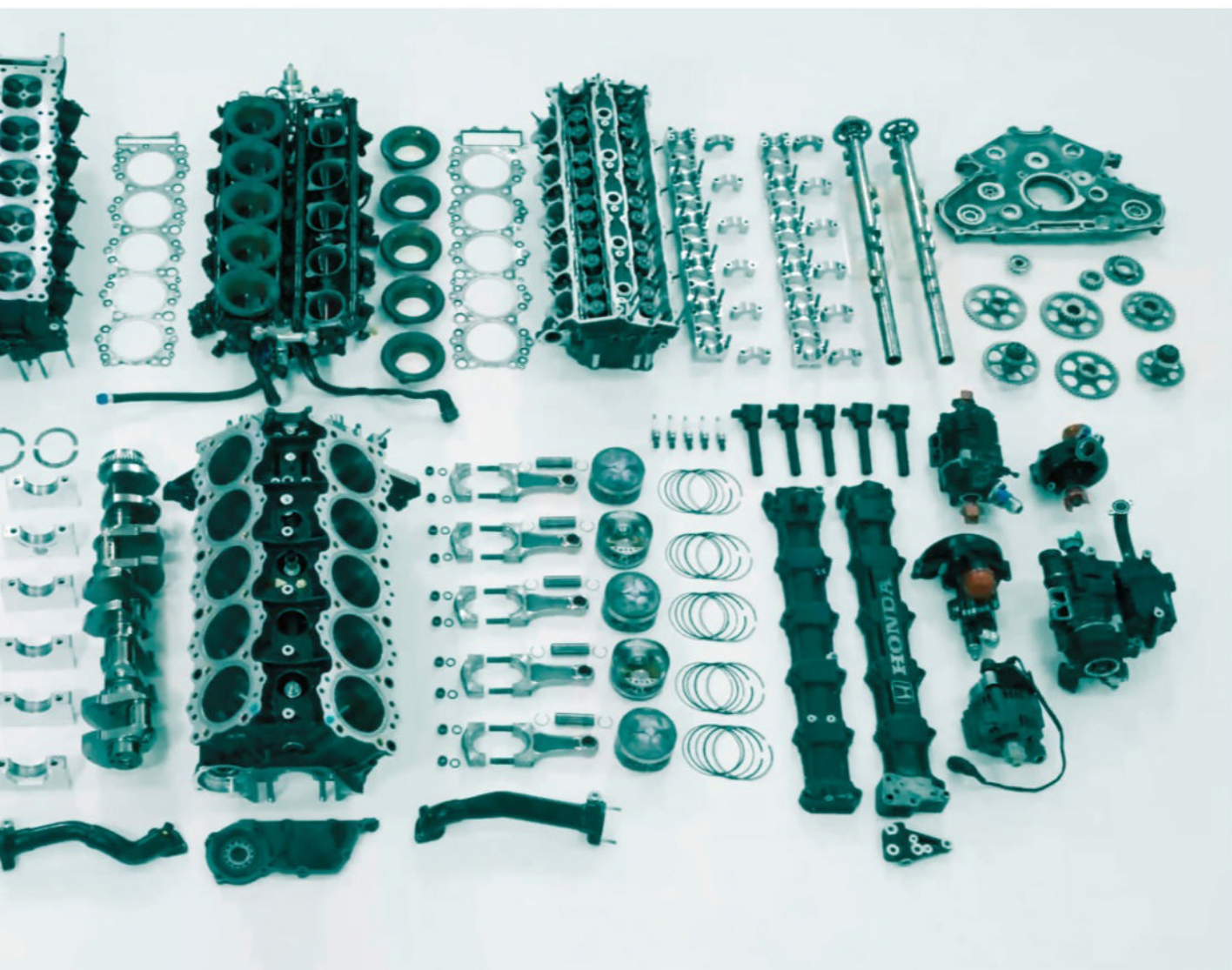


Quite beautiful in pieces; savage at full chat

up with never seemed as impressive.

These engines were not Honda's first in F1, though. The big breakthrough came as long ago as 1965, in only Honda's second season in F1. The RA272E was a 1.5-litre V12 fitted in Honda's own car, and was unusual in being mounted transversely, like in a motorcycle. Despite a race win in 1965 it wasn't as successful as Honda hoped, but nevertheless was very indicative of Honda-ness in the innovation it displayed. It was instigated at a time when Honda was still feeling its way with cars, and it owed most of its thinking to motorcycling.

For many years Honda's engines stood out by having more cylinders than their rivals offered, which added to the exotic sheen, and might be mistaken for showing off, but came about for perfectly sound engineering reasons. The key factor was that during the '60s valve spring materials were not very good, and one way to get more reliability was to lighten the valves they controlled, subjecting the spring material to less stress. In turn, this meant that only small valves could be used and so, logically, many valves would be needed, leading to a requirement to spread them across many cylinders. The classic example of this thinking was the RC166, a six-cylinder 250cc engine, and there was also the RC149 125cc five-cylinder.



Such delights elicit reverence among engineers.

After dominating all the motorcycle racing classes in 1966, Honda decided to pull out in 1967, having nothing left to prove. But in 1977 it announced its intention to return using four-stroke engines with the NR500 (for 'New Racing'). Honda considered itself a four-stroke company, and calculated that to have any hope against the two-strokes in bike racing's top tier it would really need a V8. Inconveniently, in the intervening period a four-cylinder limit had been imposed. This was the trigger for HRC to do what it does best. It thought laterally – extremely so.

It saw there was no definition in the rules covering the shape of a cylinder and so, essentially, HRC took a 500cc V8 concept and siamesed pairs of cylinders together to make an oval-piston V4 with 32 valves, eight spark plugs, and two connecting rods for each piston. While this engine was thoroughly unsuccessful, it still represented a staggering achievement; it eventually gave rise to the NR750 road bike – again, the object of much worship.

After the failure of the NR500, Honda did another very Honda thing: it accepted that it would have to do a two-stroke to compete, and the one it created was utterly dominant for many years. You should never underestimate HRC.

This rule change was the trigger for HRC to do what it does best. It thought laterally – extremely so



It's about the emotion (in an 866bhp kind of way)



► **It's back.** A decade after the demise of the 458 Speciale, perhaps the greatest road-going Ferrari ever built (complaints to the usual address), the name returns on a lighter, faster and more expensive version of the 296. And again, the focus is on sheer driving enjoyment: on elevating the supercar driving experience to new heights of dry-throated, heart-racing ecstasy.

That's good news. In this respect this is a very different proportion to the 'all-out' performance of the F8o, the LaFerrari successor Maranello unveiled earlier this year. To keep things in perspective, though, the new Speciale will be quick by any metric, and the most powerful rear-wheel-drive production Ferrari ever made. Power is up to 866bhp, the 0-62mph time drops to just 2.8 seconds, and weight is down by 60kg. But that's only half the story.

NEW CARS

In the name of the GOAT

Curtis Moldrich Digital editor

A less restrictive new exhaust system gives the Speciale richer, louder and more harmonious bark

'This Speciale derived from this donor car is not just an exercise where we put a few additional horsepower that we are doing, or we just reduce a little bit the weight that we are doing,' Enrico Galliera, Ferrari's chief commercial officer, explains. 'We start creating a new concept. So, there is a reason for a client to buy this car, even if he already owns the donor car.'

'Our book of strategy is very small, and it's synthesised in this sentence: different Ferrari for different Ferrari,' he continues. The 296 Speciale is 'for pilots wanting to reach a very high peak of emotion.'

The aim is a car in the spirit of other Special series Ferraris, not all of them wearing the Speciale badge: Challenge Stradale, 430 Scuderia, 458 Speciale and 488 Pista, all of which prioritised engagement and excitement.

The standard 296 is a pretty handy starting point. It's compact, short of wheelbase, and with a power-dense, mid-mounted V6 at its core, its turbochargers mounted inside the 120° vee. The Speciale is fundamentally the same: 2992cc engine, eight-speed gearbox, rear-wheel drive. But Ferrari's engineers identified five key parameters for increasing engagement, rather than simply giving better performance figures: improved lateral acceleration, longitudinal acceleration, shifting, braking and sound. And then they set about enhancing each one.

'Driving emotion means the adrenaline rush that starts from the brain,' says chief production officer Gianmaria Fulgenzi. More specifically, the Speciale begins with an upgrade to the 296's V6 that borrows technology from Ferrari's various racing programmes – from its 296 Challenge racing cars, to its Le Mans-winning 499P hypercar and even its Formula 1 car, as used by Hamilton and Leclerc. All happen to be powered by V6s.

The Speciale V6's combustion chamber now operates with seven per cent more pressure than the base car, using reinforced pistons along with the same titanium connecting rods as the F80 hypercar. The crankshaft has been lightened, while F1-derived knock control and reworked engine maps extract a further 37bhp, bringing the V6's standalone output to 690bhp.

The hybrid system has also been sharpened. Motorsport-derived cooling strategies – with bigger ducts and reshaped underbody channels – unlock an additional 13bhp from the electric motor, pushing e-motor power to 177bhp and total output from 819bhp to 866bhp. The 7.45kWh battery that sits under the floor can drive the car unaided for about 15 miles, or more likely in the pitlane on a trackday, as well as acting as the starter motor.

'We also used some features for the engine that we introduced in our racing cars, especially the 499P and 296 GT3,' says Fulgenzi. 'We are milling completely the external aluminium, the extra aluminium in the cylinder block and in the crankcase.'

The engine sheds 9kg; titanium springs, an optional titanium exhaust and various bits of carbonfibre bodywork combine to bring weight down further. Tick all optional boxes – most buyers will – and the Speciale weighs in at just 1410kg – or 1460kg for the open-top Aperta.

'Much more than horsepower, we wanted to say to you that to create this kind of feeling, this kind of acceleration, deceleration, we didn't work only on the powertrain,' he explains. To nail the brief, the Speciale had to hit the right numbers across the board: on the dyno, on the weighing scales and in the wind tunnel.

A product of a continuous dialogue between chief design officer Flavio Manzoni's design team and Maranello's aerodynamicists, the Speciale adds 20 per cent more downforce at 155mph – and draws inspiration from one of Ferrari's most iconic models to do it.

At the rear there are vertical winglets echoing those of the FXX K from more than a decade ago, the LaFerrari-based development car that made some pretty remarkable steps forward with its hybrid powertrain and its aerodynamics. Here on the 296 Speciale the winglets combine with a revised active aero spoiler that is quicker to react than before.

Up front, the Speciale benefits from less obvious aerodynamic features first seen on the 296 Challenge and GT3 cars. There's a new front bumper, underbody and diffuser, all of which work to reduce drag, increase aero grip and ►

Aperta and Coupe both get FXX K-style rear winglets



Numbers are optional; your choice from 00 to 99



Up-rated suspension will keep the Speciale flat during extreme cornering, braking and acceleration

in some cases improving cooling, but without having to relocate the radiators.

Brake performance is also improved by F80-style ducts that deliver air directly to the calipers. The 296 Speciale also gets an improved version of Ferrari's ABS Evo system, allowing it to brake from 124mph to a standstill in just 106 metres. Up-rated suspension, with Multimatic dampers and titanium springs borrowed from the GT3 car, should keep the Speciale flat during extreme cornering, braking and acceleration.

The tyres have been developed specifically for the Speciale. They're a new version of Michelin's Pilot Sport Cup2, developed using experience gained from the F80 project, Ferrari says.

The eight-speed dual-clutch gearbox remains, but new software boosts the torque before upshifts, delivering gearchanges that respond more quickly to the driver's paddle input. The engine sound as you change gear has been tuned too, with a less restrictive new exhaust system giving the Speciale richer, louder and more harmonious bark than before on both up and downchanges.

And to bombard the senses further, Ferrari's engineers have doubled the number of acoustic ducts that pipe sound from the V6 to the cabin; real sound, but artificially guided to your ears.

The cabin is fundamentally the same as the regular 296's, but look closely and you'll see that the same 'simplify and add lightness' approach taken to the rest of the car

has also been applied here. There are fewer components in total, and a more stripped-down look. There's more use of exposed carbonfibre, including a simple new door panel and the transmission tunnel, and more alcantara. The aim is to make it feel more race-focused; that it looks great too is an agreeable bonus.

The Speciale won't be made in limited numbers as such but will be offered for a limited time. The coupe will be available to buy for active clients only (those who have bought a new or used car within the last five years), and the Aperta adds further hoops to jump through – along with a higher asking price.

Those lucky enough to qualify will pay €407,000 (about £347k) for the coupe and €462,000 (£394k) for the Aperta. And they'll be able to judge for themselves whether Ferrari's prioritisation of feel over outright numerical supremacy has left them feeling short-changed in any way. Our guess is no.



Stripped-down cabin helps overall weight loss

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► If the slightly woolly notion of ‘analogue’ has a poster boy, it’s the Ineos Grenadier. Its rugged take on the traditional 4x4 has hit a nerve, and the fact that a whole new car was created in the 2020s with so little software surprised a lot of people.

‘There are more than enough people in the world that love the fact that when others are going for heavy automation and electronics – an interface that’s like a smartphone, the car’s driving you, sanitising how you feel about driving – some of it driven by legislation, some of it driven by trends, we’re off in completely the opposite direction,’ Lynn Calder, CEO of Ineos Automotive, tells CAR.

‘It is an irrational purchase in a lot of ways, but it does carry so much emotion.’

Not everyone loves the Grenadier, but it has done what

I N D U S T R Y

Never mind all-electric: where’s the Ineos V8?

Colin Overland Production editor

If it's outlawed in some territories, that won't stop Ineos building it and continuing to sell it in countries where it's still okay

petrochemicals billionaire Jim Ratcliffe set out to do: fill the gap left by the demise of the old Land Rover Defender. The Grenadier is out there crossing rivers and dunes, towing lifeboats and supporting conservation projects.

'We don't want to be all things to all people,' says Calder. 'Early adopters have definitely been extreme off-road enthusiasts who understand the engineering and are using the car week-in, week-out and doing amazing things, and modifying it really heavily.'

'I've been in the US and China in the last couple of weeks and everyone's like: when are we getting the V8?'

'In China we're seeing a real growth in the work hard, play hard mentality among professionals. We offer something completely different, and that's resonating even in China, where technology is king.'

The Fusilier prototype was unveiled in early 2024, with talk of full electric and range-extender electric versions. But in the absence of consistency and clarity about the details and timing of banning combustion engines, progress on the Fusilier has slowed.

'We don't want to spend any more money until we know what the landscape looks like. I'm hopeful. But at the moment we're going to concentrate on the platform that we've actually built. There's so much we can do with that,' says Calder. The slightly smaller, less blocky body created by design chief Toby Ecuyer for the Fusilier was widely admired. 'What we're planning for is a different product that's slightly smaller and slightly more urban [than the Grenadier], still very off-road capable, with a few more comforts. There's lots of reasons to want to bring that to market, not powertrain related.'

For now, the Grenadier and its Quartermaster pick-up variant come with the choice of petrol or diesel 3.0-litre six-cylinder BMW engine. In a couple of years, they will switch to 48-volt mild hybrids. There's no end date attached to Grenadier production. If it's outlawed in some territories, that won't stop Ineos building it and continuing to sell it in countries where it's still okay.

'If we can't get that clarity, then we've got other markets. I don't want that to be the case. UK, Germany, France, Austria – these are our heartland countries for a British company with Austrian and German engineering and components, manufactured in France – how sad to be not bringing our cars into those markets. That's not the plan. But we would really like governments to recognise that what they might like ideologically is not happening. Tell us where you want to get to from a future emissions perspective and let us – the whole industry – come with a menu of options to get to that CO2 level.'

There's plenty of scope for increasing output at the Hambach factory, which Ineos bought from Mercedes, and that continued to produce the Smart until last spring. Ineos now has the whole factory. Although the hope is that increased global demand will gradually fill it, that's not the only option. Would Ineos consider leasing some capacity to a Chinese EV maker wanting to build in Europe, for instance? 'We're open. Hambach is massive. We don't use all the space. We've bought a very large complex

that we can either grow into or we can work with others.'

For a brand so proudly analogue and combustion-centric, Ineos is also making progress shrinking its carbon footprint. It's opened a €15m biomass plant that will supply 78 per cent of the factory's heating, cutting annual CO2 emissions by around 8800 tonnes in the process.

The first three years have not been smooth. Like the rest of the industry, Ineos was hit by semiconductor supply issues. And last year there was a bonus blow: seat supplier Recaro hit financial problems.

'That wasn't a great day.' But Calder opted to pause Grenadier production while Recaro found a solution, rather than inject cash itself. Some of the Ineos workforce was redeployed in dismantling the old Smart line, but others were idle.

'For me it's business principles. I can't afford to run someone else's business. I've got more than enough things to invest our money in on our side of the fence. It was short-term pain for a long-term fix. I'm very glad we did it, although it felt really rubbish, when we'd got demand, we've got a workforce here that really wanted to work. It takes nerve to take decisions like that.'

Unexpected
hitch with
seats paused
production
last year



Move over, Audi. Skoda's on a mission

Tim Pollard Digital content director

► **It's exactly 25 years this month** since Volkswagen completed its gradual takeover of Skoda, turning the budget Czech brand into a global player. Skoda has since become one of the strongest brands in the group, with its unrelenting focus on practicality, space and keen pricing, qualities that never fall out of fashion.

Skoda recently announcing record turnover of €27.8 billion (£23.8bn) in 2024, as operating profit jumped by a third to €2.3bn (£2bn) on a margin of 8.3 per cent to overtake Audi's. In the same period profit dropped at Audi, Porsche and the VW brand.

Although Skoda chairman Klaus Zellmer is proud of those successes, it's not all plain sailing in Mladá Boleslav. Skoda, like all car makers, is being battered by changing sentiment towards electric cars and an unpredictable geopolitical situation. Zellmer's approach is to pick a course that provides shelter from the headwinds, to hedge his bets on powertrains and to switch sales focus to safer harbours. The chairman confirms that Skoda is de-prioritising China – the country which for much of the past decade stood for growth and opportunity.

**Zellmer:
winning today,
preparing for
tomorrow**

'We used to have a big footprint in China,' he muses. 'In 2019 we sold around 350,000 cars there, but this is not a focus point any more for Skoda. We are looking forward to India being one of the biggest potential growth markets globally. They have strong GDP growth, the government is making the right decisions and the forecast for further growth between five and seven per cent in a market that size is huge.'

Skoda will sell the new electric Elroq at the same price as its petrol equivalent, the Karoq. This autumn it ventures into new territory by revealing an electric Octavia – the first time the company has used a familiar badge on an EV. Cheaper EVs will continue with next year's Epiq small crossover, which Zellmer predicts will quickly become the company's biggest-selling EV.

Zellmer rules out a Skoda-badged version of the VW ID.1, quashing hopes of an electrified return of the Citi-go/Up/Mii trilogy, and casting some interesting light on where Skoda sits in the group these days. 'We have decided not to be part of that segment. We believe within the Volkswagen Group that VW will conquer that part of the market. At the same time we decided to extend the lifecycle of Fabia, Scala and Kamiq until the end of this decade. The Fabia starts below €20,000 (£17,000) and we will introduce a mild hybrid version.'

This pragmatic move will delay the great EV switchover considerably, which is good news for the EV-agnostic but also good news for the bottom line. 'Every car that Skoda sells has to make a profit,' Zellmer vows. 'Unfortunately, the profit of our internal-combustion cars is bigger than on our electric vehicles.'

Last year's record turnover was produced by just 926,000 cars – way below the 1.25 million sales posted in 2018. It proves that Skoda's strategy of moving upmarket, selling fewer cars but at higher prices and greater profits, is bearing fruit.





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I N D U S T R Y

Weaponising heritage: is the past the future?

Angus MacKenzie Global industry commentator



Merc's history
casts a long
shadow over
its present

Mini a rare case of cars feeling the same for decades



► **'The Chinese can now build** very, very good cars,' said the Mercedes-Benz executive, noting that a prototype of the Xiaomi SU7 Ultra sedan had recently (unofficially) obliterated the four-door production-car lap record set by Porsche's Taycan Turbo GT. 'But,' he said, waving his arm at the mouthwatering selection of classic cars on the Mercedes-Benz stand at Retromobile in Paris earlier this year, 'they don't have this.'

What he meant by 'this' was heritage; the history of the Mercedes-Benz brand made real in steel and chrome, rubber and glass. Old Henry Ford may have once claimed history was bunk, but a growing number of legacy car makers are today hoping history means bucks.

In an era when a company that barely a decade ago was making smartphones can produce a Porsche-beating electric car, heritage is perhaps the one thing that sets those legacy manufacturers apart from their increasingly competent Chinese rivals. And the smart ones are trying to turn that to their advantage.

This is not a rerun of the retro craze that 25 years ago spawned cars like the New Beetle, the R50 Mini, the Audi TT, the Jaguar S-Type and the Ford Thunderbird. Those were mostly little more than design whimsies whose relevance as products was no more than skin deep. The exception was the Mini, a car designed from the wheels up to echo the spirit as well as the style of the original, which BMW brilliantly leveraged into a complete brand identity.

It's tempting to regard Renault's new electric-powered reinventions of its 4 and 5 simply as 21st century retro cars. But that is selling them short, says Renault's global marketing director, Arnoud Belloni. 'People say when you revive your icons you have no imagination. That's wrong,' Belloni says. He points out that as the average age of a new car buyer in Europe now is 50, there is a whole cohort of potential customers with strong – and fond – memories of the original 4 and 5 models when they were fixtures on French roads.

Renault, much like BMW did with the launch of the R50 Mini, has supported the new 4 and 5 with a range of merchandise – from clothing to coffee machines, ►



Photography: RECOM Paris

‘There is no battery watch in the world that is a luxury watch,’ says the boss of Mercedes Heritage

surfboards to satchels – whose pop culture vibe appeals to a much younger audience. Leveraging heritage can add value to a brand, Belloni contends. ‘The best example of a perfect treatment of heritage in terms of value creation is the French luxury industry,’ he says, citing brands such as Louis Vuitton and Dior. ‘When you have a heritage, you tell a story. You cherish it, you use it to nurture the present, and to nurture the future.’

Whether it’s Louis Vuitton and Dior, or Aston Martin and Ferrari, perceptions of the value and desirability of brands boils down to how consumers view the relationship between the products and their heritage. Belloni believes Renault’s way of leveraging heritage – next up: an electric Twingo – provides an opportunity to differentiate it from other mainstream car makers, to make it less of a commodity transportation brand.

Mercedes-Benz has long understood this: seeking to position its vehicles at the cutting edge of automotive technology, while never missing an opportunity to remind the world its founders invented the car.

‘Heritage creates the future,’ says Marcus Breitschwerdt, boss of Mercedes-Benz Heritage, established in April 2023 to bring together the various elements of Mercedes-Benz’s vast array of historic assets – the classic car collection, the museums, the archives, the restoration business and sales of spare parts.

Breitschwerdt is a big hitter within Benz – one of the company’s five executive vice-presidents, he reports di-

rectly to chairman and CEO Ola Källenius. That’s a lot of corporate horsepower to throw at a bunch of old cars and some museums. But the thinking is that Mercedes-Benz Heritage will become the bridge between Mercedes-Benz’s long and remarkable past and a future where its vehicles will be increasingly defined by electric motors, batteries, screens, and computers.

‘Our heritage is striving for breakthrough technology, of thinking through concepts and trying new solutions,’ says Breitschwerdt. ‘It’s not a break in the chain to go from internal combustion engines to electric motors. It is simply following our heritage, and by using the collection, the museum, the archives, the events, our knowledge, we can explain that.’

Breitschwerdt admits making EV technology feel luxurious will be a challenge. ‘A battery does many things, but it doesn’t cry luxury. There is no battery watch in the world that is a luxury watch.’

That’s a conundrum Jaguar is also hoping it can use heritage to resolve. The uncompromisingly blunt, extravagantly proportioned Type 00 electric car concept re-



vealed late last year appeared to thrust a brutalist middle finger at Jaguar's heritage.

'Forget everything that went before,' JLR's chief creative officer Gerry McGovern had told the design team, and the Type 00 certainly has none of the usual Jaguar archetypes; no hint of British Racing Green or interiors basking in the warm glow of wood, the rich tang of leather, and bright splashes of chrome. But among all the controversy surrounding the launch, Jaguar was careful to include reference to its heritage: 'The Type 00 commands attention, like all the best Jaguars of the past,' said chief exterior designer Tino Segui.

For McGovern, Jaguar's problem was that it took its heritage too literally. 'It was looking back too much,' he says. 'Jaguar has its roots in originality. Sir William Lyons believed that a Jaguar should be a copy of nothing.'

Ford's new Capri, which appends a model name with strong pop-culture resonances to a bland and forgettable electric-powered crossover, shows how not to play the heritage game; like the Mustang Mach-E, it comes across as a desperately cynical marketing ploy.

China's car makers may not be able to play the heritage game, but they can buy into it. For example, the Volvos developed since Geely took over the Swedish car maker look and feel like Volvos, regardless of where they are made. Geely's Lotus is a trickier proposition: while the Emira is arguably the best Lotus in history in terms of it being a fast, agile sports car that doesn't feel worryingly

Jaguar risks throwing the baby out with the bathwater

fragile, the big, heavy electric-powered Eletre and Emeya are far removed from the Colin Chapman back story.

Geely's cleverest heritage play is perhaps the LEVC TX taxi, a modern hybrid minivan whose design riffs on the form of the classic Austin FX4 that has been a part of London's streetscape since 1957, and overlays it with vastly improved functionality.

Will the great heritage gamble work? It may give some legacy car makers an edge over their fast-evolving Chinese rivals. But not for long. Tomorrow's history is being written today. Xiaomi has already built a car that can beat a Porsche. It's already creating its own heritage.



First drives

THE WORLD'S BEST WRITERS IN THE NEW CARS THAT MATTER



The 300-mile test

NEW CAR MEETS REAL WORLD



THE 300-MILE TEST

The Morgan things change

Morgan arrives in the 21st century with the new Supersport. Has that classic character survived?

Words Piers Ward Photography Jordan Butters



There are few
more distinctive
faces on the
planet



Wider track
than the Plus
Six, and much
fuller fenders

W

hen it feels like the world is spinning ever faster, it's a relief to jump in the Morgan Supersport and arrive at your first junction. Because it's at this

point that you'll flick the indicator stalk and realise that the click-clack tempo is just that little bit slower; like a calming metronome, it winds everything back a fraction and you begin to forget the 349 unread emails that had been boring into your subconscious. And breathe.

Morgan has spent most of its 116 years trading on the past, but with the new Supersport all that changes. For a start, there is no option for wire wheels. Nor any louvres on the bonnet. Instead, this is a Morgan that acknowledges what has gone before but is confident about the future; a retro design with a modern twist.

It's a big leap from a company that's changing fast. Matthew Hole, previously tech chief and now managing director, has put in place systems and processes that would have been unheard of before. There are computers. Now, with the benefit of advanced modelling techniques, the company can map out updates virtually, without having to go to the effort and expense of making them for real.

According to Joe Whaler, lead chassis engineer, this has allowed Morgan to trim months from its engineering schedule. 'We do much more upfront analysis compared to years gone by, to cut out some of the loops in development and prototyping, to help us get where we want to be a lot faster. On the Supersport, we did a lot of computer kinematics and compliance work.'

The Supersport uses a new platform, CXV. Based on the bonded aluminium underpinnings from the Plus Six (which goes out of production soon), it's nevertheless new enough that Morgan has had to crash test the Supersport afresh. Torsional rigidity has increased by 10 per cent, with an additional 10 per cent possible if you opt for the hardtop (a £4194 optional extra). The steering is also 13 per cent quicker than before and Morgan has managed to remove one of the universal joints to reduce friction and, in theory, help improve feedback.

The Supersport has double-wishbone suspension all-round and, unlike the Plus Six, front and rear anti-roll bars as standard. There's an option of a slippy diff (£2340) and, like the Plus Six, a Dynamic Handling pack (£3000) consisting of four Nitron dampers – an option ticked on every single Supersport customer order so far.

Nitron is our first stop. Because there's one other big difference with the Supersport, and a nod to the challeng-



ing demands of the modern motorist – the car has an actual boot. What better way to test it out than getting some parts from Nitron and ferrying them back to Morgan? The 21st century is all about diversification so CAR is now offering courier services.

Built in a workshop that makes an operating theatre look dirty, the Nitron dampers are aluminium gas-pressurised, mono-tube and single-valve units; the standard Spax units are dual-tube, single-valve and made of steel. The Nitrons are also 24-way adjustable: the cars come out of the factory at 15 away from full stiff, but owners can tweak them by hand without having to remove a wheel.

It all feels a bit trackday special. But there are nods to Morgan's core audience. Nitron uses rubber end-eyes to reduce noise and vibration, and Morgan has set the car up with an additional 80mm (front) and 70mm (rear) bump travel, to give it more ability on our scarred roads.

Box loaded – just, it's a tight fit – it's time to head across to Wales. Hardly the most direct route back to Morgan ▶

Optional Nitron dampers are 24-way adjustable and work superbly

Pick-up: 0 miles



First impressions reveal it to be a lot longer and sleeker than the Plus Six it replaces. Makes the old car almost look dumpy in comparison.

1 mile



What-ho! It's very helpful if you have your man on standby for when you want to adjust the wing mirrors. Reminds me of my riding mechanic from 1924.

5 miles



Incredible Nitron workshop that's buried in a quiet, but huge, industrial park outside Witney, Oxfordshire. Proof that the UK can still build things.



Choice of wheel styles, but there's always four of them

but the Cotswold roads around Nitron are clogged, so we divert in search of decent tarmac.

Turn the key, press the button and the Supersport starts with a pleasing whump from the exhaust. It's the same straight-six twin-turbo BMW engine as the Plus Six with the same output (335bhp and 369lb ft) and still mated to the ZF eight-speed automatic. The Supersport's 0-62mph time is quicker than every Porsche Cayman bar the GT4 RS and also faster than the Plus Six. Much of the credit must go to the Supersport's improved aerodynamics, new tyres and anti-squat suspension set-up at the rear.

The increase in pace over the Plus Six comes despite a 25kg weight gain for the new car. Still, in the grand scheme of things this is a very light car. If you think the Supersport's weight of 1170kg is just that bit too porky, there are lightweighting options available, including forged alloy wheels, saving 1.1kg a corner. You appreciate the lack of flab when you turn the wheel for the first time and feel its delicacy.

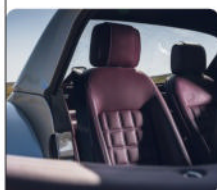
The BMW-sourced straight-six would ideally sound slightly smoother at idle but it settles down as soon as the car is up to speed. I start off thinking the seat is mounted too high but soon get used to it. It brings the added bonus that you're not eye-balling the undersides of lorries, unlike in a Caterham, where you can feel very exposed.

You need to familiarise yourself with the eight-speed auto 'box's modes: Normal, Sport and Sport+. Near Jeremy Clarkson's pub I've been using Normal, but that gives the software permission to upshift wherever it can. So as you come into a roundabout on a trailing throttle and then go for it, the 'box lurches into the lower ratio. It takes the edge off what has so far been a seamless powertrain. ►



Slightly longer suspension travel a boon to comfort

20 miles



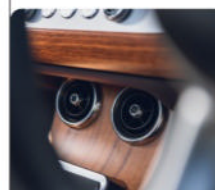
Seats are comfortable, with decent levels of underthigh support. But if you have a fat back you'll find the upright is quite narrow.

31 miles



No touchscreen! But not everything is what it seems in the retro-looking interior, as those two knobs twist and push to perform multiple functions.

56 miles



Twin vents under the dash look good but can struggle to keep the heat at bay on a warm day. My left arm gets frozen while my right arm cooked.

You appreciate the lack
of flab when you turn the
wheel for the first time
and feel its delicacy



63 miles



Only after an hour do we hear our first beep as the seatbelt warning kicks in when we restart after a breather. Supersport is free of any nannying.

75 miles



It's a Morgan, and a Piers (and a bridge, for no reason). Supersport is as keen on attention as our celebrity namesake, if less controversial.

112 miles



Long, louvre-less bonnet sticks out a long way ahead of the driver, making pulling out of junctions an exercise in trepidation.





Driver feels
connected
to the
environment



Handbrake!
Ignition key! No
touchscreen!

Nods to modernity like the Sennheiser audio contribute to the wider appeal of the Supersport

The next chunk of our journey is mainly dual carriage-way and motorway, the sort of roads that would traditionally fill Morgan owners with dread. But with the new hardtop, the Supersport is almost bearable – below 50mph it's possible to have an actual conversation with your passenger. I even fire up the music on my phone and listen to that new-fangled 'popular' music via the £3600 Sennheiser speakers.

As standard, it gets speakers in the doors and rear bulkhead; the Sennheiser system adds improved speakers, a subwoofer and lightweight actuators that are attached to the chassis and cause it to vibrate, effectively turning the car itself into a speaker. Further witchcraft has been added in that active noise-cancelling speakers allow for hands-free telephone conversations, a Morgan first.

Don't get carried away, though. At motorway speeds the wind noise becomes overpowering. You can still just about hear modern music but all the detail is gone, ruling out podcasts and anything classical – best save Rachmaninoff for when you're back home. Overall, though, the Sennheiser collaboration is yielding decent results. It's not a new relationship and Bluetooth connectivity has been on Morgans for a while now. But the way the system is integrated into the Supersport and thought out as a whole across the car is impressive. It adds to the impression of a cohesive unit. These little nods to modernity all contribute to the wider appeal of the Supersport.

As the M4 continues to head west and the boredom of the slog starts to take hold, it's a chance to prod and poke at the interior. This is a pre-production car but it feels really well made: I can't hear any squeaks or rattles.

There are still the odd quirks. The push buttons controlling the air-con are nice to the touch but there's not much difference in the lighting between on and off – in bright sunshine, I keep pressing them to work out whether they are engaged or not.

I like the look and feel of it all, but that comes at a price. It starts at £102,000, and with all the options fitted it's £126,861. I've mentioned the hardtop and Nitrons already, but other items like the soft-grain leather interior (£1695), heated seats (£420), box-weave anthracite carpet (£600)



and matte finish to the cockpit wood (£295) all add up.

Of course you don't have to have all these – leather is standard, the standard wheels look good – and Morgan is hardly the first to be guilty of making hay from the extras (hello, Porsche). But my point is that making this car appeal beyond the Morgan hardcore will involve fitting a lot of those options, meaning a price in excess of £110k. And you can get a lot of very good alternatives for that.

Just before we head into Wales we hit a bit of concrete, which highlights a limitation of the chassis: the high-frequency ridges in the concrete make the car patter. It's really minor – I'm nit-picking even mentioning it – but the nose and tail skip across them slightly, as if there's a solid beam axle and not independent wishbones.

Otherwise, the damping and suspension control are remarkable. I haven't driven a car with the standard Spax dampers but on the evidence of how well these Nitron shocks control wheel movement, I suspect they're money well spent. One tiny incident: the wheels on one side hit an uneven lump of tarmac, but nothing is transmitted to the other side. One wheel absorbs, the other stays absolutely true and there's no flex across the body.

You get a little bit of scuttle shake through severe pot-holes, but I'm talking really cavernous ones. On the whole, the Supersport feels incredibly well tied down and has a ►

Above idle, the pipes emit a fine sound from the BMW six

121 miles



The fabric door cards mean you can close the door without getting finger marks on the paintwork. A boon for anyone with OCD tendencies.

134 miles

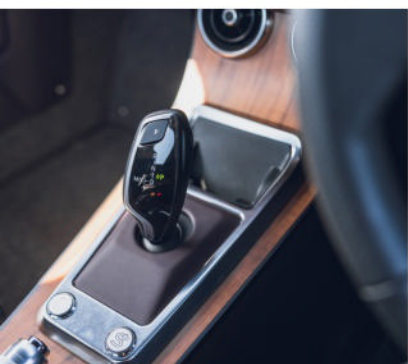


It's an easy process to remove the window part of the doors for that close-to-nature feel. They can be stored in the boot, if it's not full of picnic hampers.

134 miles



You get used to saying that Morgans aren't like other cars, but there's an extra layer with the Supersport, so it's also unlike other Morgans.



BMW's very un-Malvern gearlever is non-negotiable

Data

PRICE

£102,000
(£126,861 as tested)

POWERTRAIN

2998cc 24v twin-turbo straight-six, eight-speed auto, rear-wheel drive

PERFORMANCE

335bhp @ 6500rpm,
369lb ft @ 1250rpm,
3.9sec 0-62mph,
166mph

WEIGHT

1170kg

EFFICIENCY

36.8mpg (official),
175g/km CO2

ON SALE

Now

RATING

★★★★

maturity to its engineering that you don't often find in small-volume British sports cars.

There are dials in the Supersport (speedo to the left, tacho to the right, clock in the middle), analogue and with a crisp, modern look. But I find I'm not actually using them, instead getting all the information I need from the digital read-out in front of me. It's the same component found in the Plus Four and Plus Six.

As we exit Crickhowell and begin to wind up to moorland, the Supersport finally gets a chance to stretch its legs. I'm reminded of what the lead chassis engineer told me about how Morgan has tried to set this car up: 'We've had an eye on compliance, and really what we were aspiring for was a nice, linear, predictable response.' Anti-squat geometry has been added to the rear suspension, as well as hub recession, 'so as the rear wheels bump upwards, they also travel rearwards as well to help with impact harshness'.

On these moorland roads, it's had a transformative effect. It's not the smoothest tarmac, but the Supersport dances gracefully across the lumps and bumps. It has enough eccentricity to still be a Morgan but without any wayward moments – moments when it does something unexpected. It's brilliantly predictable.

What really impresses is how the tail follows the nose seamlessly. You can thread the car through a corner with precision, long snout showing the way, your eyes dancing from tarmac to paintwork, the silver glinting in the rare Welsh sun. Rear tyres working hard, but absorbing and responding just as you'd want. It never feels like the tail is wagging the dog, which is normally a pet hate of mine with roadsters in which you sit so far from the action.

I particularly enjoy how the car combines bodyroll with handling prowess to give a package that rewards. When you give the remarkable BMW engine its head, the Supersport's rear has a lovely lollap through a bend, just enough to let you know where everything is, not so much that you feel like you're in a boat.

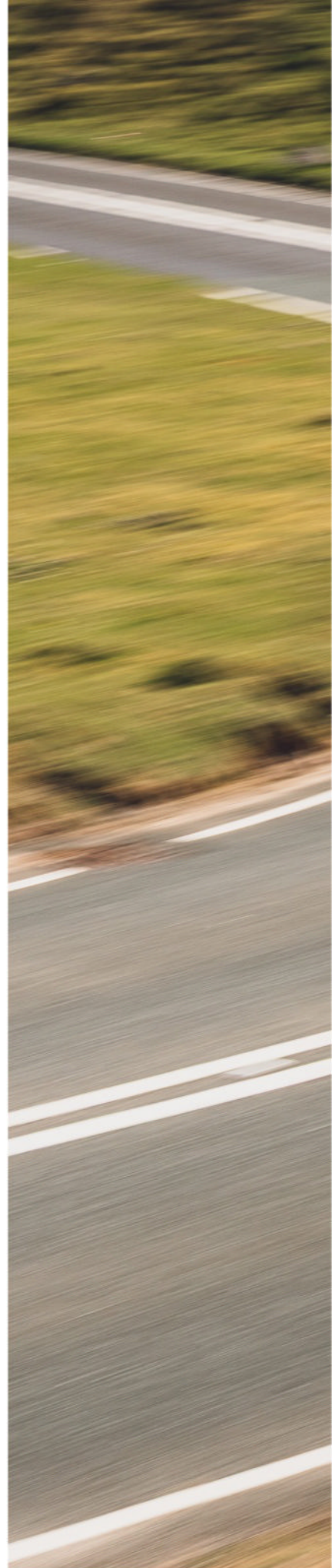
The gearbox comes alive when you drop it into Sport or Sport+ and then get on the paddles, shifting up and down manually with precision and speed and even a bit of pop from the exhaust on the overrun. I was initially worried that the steering was a bit nervous when I first drove the car, but over time noticed this less and less, and now up on these roads, it feels glorious. Electrically assisted it may be, but there's so much feel and feedback – from the steering and the chassis as a whole – that I don't find myself hankering after a hydraulic system.

It's the sort of car that keeps the enjoyment flowing, to the point where it's disappointing when we have to stop enjoying ourselves and get that Nitron package to the Morgan factory before the gates shut.

Could you use the Supersport as your daily driver? You'd need commitment. But the fact we're even asking the question shows how usable it is compared to other Morgans. It feels incredibly well engineered and cohesive. It's idiosyncratic but not irritating. Crucially, it brings Morgan into 2025 without forgetting where it's come from. **car**

Next month

THE 911 TURBO, SINGER STYLE



**It has a maturity to its
engineering you don't
often find in small-volume
British sports cars**



**This new car
rolls around a lot
more, which is
rather unnerving**



**New look,
and new
disappointments**

TESLA MODEL Y

Y oh Y

Neat new look. But the things that needed fixing? Sorry, no progress

The huge-selling Model Y has always fallen short in some ways. Even compared to the Model 3 it's based on, it feels less together, not so enjoyable to drive. Tesla reckons this facelifted version is better to drive, more user-friendly, more comfortable and more efficient, as well as getting a squinty new look. Having spent a day driving it, though, I'm not entirely convinced. This updated Model Y seems to be built on hype it can't live up to.

As before, the cabin won't be to everyone's tastes. To me, it's an ergonomic nightmare. Almost everything is controlled from the touchscreen, even menial tasks like tweaking the steering column or adjusting the door mirrors. What's worse is the software running the touchscreen isn't foolproof. The safety-assist menu told me I'd been flattened by various trucks, yet I'm here to tell the tale, and the Spotify app couldn't hold a connection for even half a song.

There's a lot wrong with the way the new Model Y drives, too. The steering's weird. When I wound past a quarter of a turn, the column gaunched like it'd spent the last month at the bottom of the Dead Sea.

The ride's appalling, too. We complained at length about the old Model Y's ride and, for this facelifted car, Tesla's made it worse. It now has softer springs, but the damping hasn't been adjusted to suit. That means it's floaty until you hit a bump, at which point it immediately becomes uncomfortable as the granite dampers can't compress quickly enough to absorb the impact. It's irritatingly unsettled around town.

This change has influenced the handling, too. The old Model Y wasn't too bad in corners – the cast iron chassis set-up meant it controlled its two-tonne heft quite well. But this new car rolls around a lot more, which is rather unnerving, especially when you consider how sterile the steering is.

It doesn't fill you with confidence, and it's certainly not a car for keen drivers. If you try to throw it down your favourite B-road, it'll understeer into the verge long before rivals



Revised Model Y is still very Tesla inside

such as the Kia EV6 or BMW iX2. I managed to get the Tesla's tyres screaming and its front end washing wide at just 40mph.

Find a straight bit of road, though, and you'll embarrass most things short of a supercar. The AWD version is very, very fast. I've never had a bike licence, but I now think I get the appeal: if you can see a gap in the traffic, you've always got the power to exploit it. The cabin's also plenty spacious enough, the boot's enormous and you should easily be able to drive around 300 miles in a Long Range version.

Tesla's battery and motor technology are still right at the pointy end of the class – and its Supercharger network is still the most convenient way of topping up an EV on the move. But the revised Model Y feels unfinished to me. I'd much rather spend my money on the recently updated EV6.

I don't think it would take much to uncork the potential. Tesla just needs a few more engineers worrying about steering and suspension settings rather than getting ever more gimmicky with the software. And please stick some buttons in it.

LUKE WILKINSON

First verdict

A missed opportunity to make a frustratingly flawed car into one deserving its sales success

★★★★★



THE FIRST HOUR

5 minutes

Finally got the mirrors adjusted, after going through sub-menu after sub-menu

6 minutes

Hell, the steering feels like it's been pulled from a knackered BL product

10 minutes

Why's the suspension so crashy? The A1 isn't exactly a farm track

28 minutes

That's the 19th car that's carved me up. Four middle fingers and counting

56 minutes

Crikey, it's quick

PLUS

Good battery efficiency; AWD model is properly quick; great charging network

MINUS

Uncomfortable ride; irritating cabin ergonomics; boss's questionable public utterances

Data	PRICE	POWERTRAIN	PERFORMANCE	WEIGHT	EFFICIENCY	ON SALE
	£51,990 (Long Range AWD)	75kWh battery, two e-motors, all-wheel drive	507bhp, 4.8 sec 0-62mph, 125mph (all figures tbc)	1997kg	4.2 miles per kWh, 364-mile range, 0g/km	Now

**It's as if different
people designed
different bits
of the cabin in
isolation**



**At its best, it's
like a Puma
but electric**

FORD PUMA GEN-E

Too little, too late

Ford has taken its time. So why's the electric Puma not better?

If you're feeling charitable you could regard the so-so Mustang Mach-E, Explorer and Capri as being warm-up acts, a chance for Ford to get a feel for the audience before unleashing the electric version of its biggest seller in the UK, the Puma.

If you're feeling less charitable, you'll point out that the market is now saturated with alternatives, many of them rather good. So the Puma Gen-E needs to be exceptional if it's to lure some of those drivers out of their Peugeot E-2008s and Vauxhall Mokka, and persuade some happy Puma owners to replace their combustion car with a more expensive EV.

The styling has been tweaked with a new closed-off grille, EV-specific colours (bright yellow and blue), a greater focus on aerodynamics and a longer rear spoiler, but it still looks exactly like a Puma – a good thing. What's not so good is the interior, made all the worse as part of the Puma's 2024 facelift. It's as if different people designed individual elements of the cabin and not once did they speak to one another during the process. It's an array of mismatched parts botched together, and it looks a mess.

The air vents plonked on the top of the dash scream afterthought and the massive steering wheel wouldn't look out of place in a 63-seater bus. It's also awkward to hold while driving. That's a shame, as the Gen-E drives a lot like the standard Puma, which is high praise. A small battery keeps the weight down, and although the electric car is 200kg heavier than the mild-hybrid Puma, it doesn't feel it from behind the wheel.

On a flowing road, a combination of direct steering and excellent body control means you can carry far more speed into a corner than you would feel comfortable doing in most rivals. There's no end of grip, too, with a lot needed to unstick the Puma, even if you turn off the driver aids.

Performance from its 166bhp electric motor is roughly similar to a Puma ST, which now uses a rather paltry 1.0-litre en-



Clumsy steering wheel a weirdly basic error

gine, with 0-62mph dispatched in eight seconds in the Gen E. It feels more than quick enough up to that speed, but plateaus beyond it. The ride has a slightly firm edge to it, typical of Ford, and although it's not as downright harsh as the ST, there's an underlying level of brittleness to it on a rougher stretch of road.

The 43kWh battery capacity is smaller than just about every rival, and allows for a claimed electric range of 233 miles. Although that figure lags behind the 250 miles or more claimed by various Stellantis products of this shape and size, it does come up trumps for efficiency, averaging 4.2 miles per kWh on our enthusiastic test drive, equating to 180 miles of real range. The boot is huge but rear-seat space is average at best.

Prices for the Gen-E kick off from £29,995, roughly £3500 more than the mild hybrid. Top-spec Premium adds LED matrix headlights, an electric boot and keyless entry for an extra £2000 – in touching distance of a Kia EV3 or Skoda Elroq, both larger, more complete electric cars with far superior interiors.

TED WELFORD

First verdict

Reassuringly familiar and good to drive like all the Pumas, but there are plenty of more rounded electric rivals

★★★★★



THE FIRST HOUR

1 minute

Cor! The new yellow looks good (in Barcelona at least...)

5 minutes

Good grief, the new Gigabox boot is massive – a real USP

11 minutes

Why is the steering wheel the size of the moon?! Such a mess

22 minutes

Five touchscreen button presses to turn off the irritating speed bonging is not acceptable

47 minutes

A pleasing familiarity to how the Gen-E drives. Nothing here to scare off current Puma owners

PLUS

Massive boot; tidy handling; efficient

MINUS

Poor interior quality and ergonomics; tight rear space; below average EV range

	PRICE	POWERTRAIN	PERFORMANCE	WEIGHT	EFFICIENCY	ON SALE
Data	£31,995 (Gen-E Select)	43kWh battery, e-motor, front-wheel-drive	164bhp, 214lb ft, 8.0sec 0-62mph, 99mph	1563kg	4.5 miles per kWh, 233-mile range, 0g/km CO2	Now

Opinion

BAD DEALERS + USED VALUES + RECURRING EXCELLENCE



Letter of the month

Peak blinders

CAR magazine, my regular monthly look at cars and the car industry since 1971, sometimes as a subscriber, sometimes as a news stand buyer; it has

always kept me fascinated with internal combustion engine technology and vehicles.

Retiring, finally, I became the owner of a 2017 Porsche 718 Boxster S in mid 2022 and I love everything about it. It replaced a Tesla Model 3 Dual Motor, an excellent vehicle and a flawless, cheap-to-run and comfortable business tool, but unlike the Porsche I wouldn't call it fun to drive.

Reading the 60-year retrospective of the Porsche 911 in CAR in the December 2023 issue, I began thinking that I need to know more about what is likely to be in the market in 2026 when my Boxster's finance ends.

So late in 2024 I took out a six-month subscription to CAR and it has left me confused. I simply do not know which way to turn: EV, PHEV,

718: accept no substitute. Because there isn't one

ICE? It seems the industry has no real idea either.

So I will very probably stick with the devil I know and refinance the Porsche for another four years, rather than look for a used 911 or 718 GTS.

I suspect I'm not alone; buyers are not turned on by the confused market, manufacturers are not able to plan for mid-term product development, confused by ever changing regulations and supply chain uncertainty and the absence of buyers.

Peter J Jenks

Look no further. You won't find better than the car you already own. CO

The order of the boot

In your piece about the original Mini (April issue) you talk about it being a hatch. Sorry, it was a small two-door, and not a hatchback.

Sorry for being so pedantic, but sometimes I just can't help it.

Great magazine as usual, only been reading it since the '60s.

Michael Stagg

The lost art of selling

Forgive me a bit of a rant – I have noticed over recent years the standard of customer service at dealerships has declined significantly. Friends and family are saying that too.

From missed appointments for test drives to cars not being available, inaccurate quotes, delivery faults not

Best car ever? There's a good argument to be made

being rectified promptly, not enough courtesy cars, service appointments not available for months... the list goes on. Premium brands are included here. There always seem to be lots of smart people behind desks in showrooms, but doing what?

Of course the irony is that dealers all 'see customer service at the heart of what we do', and they all request (demand, beg for) a five-star review. Aargh! Is it just me?

Colin Shorthouse

There's been a swing back to in-real-life, bricks-and-mortar dealerships after some big talk about going online-only. But the pendulum could easily head back that way. CO

This is a bit awkward.

Having re-read issue 743, I came across one of my previous letters, being a response to Mark Fidler saying that he is incorrect and that there may be an issue in the future headlined '60 Years of the Model 3'. Given recent events, cough cough Donald Trump, war on Teslas in LA, etc etc, I will now take the opportunity to apologise to Mark Fidler and (only slightly reluctantly) accept that there will never be one of the aforementioned headlines in CAR.

James Kendall

Safety is paramount

Your article 'NCAP Isn't Helping' (Agenda, April) was thought provoking. I believe an independent safety body tasked with testing the safety of cars is absolutely vital. The remark by Thierry Koskas, CEO of Citroën, that he does not think there needs to be another organisation, other than governments, checking the safety of new cars is concerning.

Governments are not experts in this field and even if they were they run the risk of political lobbying driving standards ever lower. As well as this, how can we possibly compare



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like for like if those rating the safety of cars are operating on differing standards on a country by country basis?

David Coombs

6 into 3 does go very nicely

What defines a truly legendary car? One view is it's a car that automatically maintains its class-leading position with each generation. I can think of only the Porsche 911 and the BMW 3-series that have achieved this. (The Range Rover and Mercedes S-Class come close but there's been the odd hiccup along the way.)

If you're looking for the greatest real-world car of all time, I'd say it's the 3-series E90 saloon. Look how many impeccable examples you still see today. And being a little extravagant, it would be a 325i over a 320d, dark blue, black leather, manual.

Nick Moffett

Is there a case for adding the Mini, Range Rover and Golf to your list of recurring class-leaders? Yes. CO

Europe defined loosely

In your review of three new 'European' electric hatchbacks (April issue), you neglect to mention that the Mini is in reality built in China, on a Chinese platform, with some European design nous ladled on top.

Obviously, China is very much the workshop of the world these days,

Made in China, yes. Made very well, also yes

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but European car manufacturing is the keystone holding much of the continent's heavy industry together. If it is lost, the implications will be enormous. I think I prefer the other two anyhow.

James Atkinson

Elon must be quaking

There wasn't a single designer in the top 10 in your Power List (March issue), yet we're in an era where style becomes substance. Look at Gerry McGovern backing up Jaguar's rebranding with Brutalist design.

The Type 00's cheeky Miami Pink paint job is a somewhat enjoyable cultural assault on Musk's America. Here's hoping the production car will make Jaguar great again.

Maxime Engels-Deutsch

Bills, bills, bills

Our Cars in the March edition said Goodbye to the Peugeot E-2008, summarising it as lacking magic. But what struck me as a bigger negative was that after just six months its part-exchange value was less than 50 per cent of the purchase price.

This doesn't seem to have prompted any outraged comment. Am I alone in questioning the sanity of anyone buying such a car? Depreciation costs of almost £5 per mile? It feels like I'm living in a surreal world when nobody sees that as fundamentally unsustainable.

AC Jones

car

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‘This driverless Jaguar i-Pace taxi was as smooth as a pro. We were in a state of disbelief’

T

here are amazing experiences to be had from the passenger seat of a car. I once rode alongside Colin McRae in a Focus WRC in '99 as the Flying Scotsman, aka Colin McCrash, opposite-locked at speed through a Cumbrian forest.

A few years before, I sat alongside Martin Brundle at the Nardo speed bowl in Italy as he broke the 200mph barrier in a Jaguar XJ220, later describing it as ‘the most dangerous thing I’ve ever done’. I have ridden alongside the likes of Juan Manuel Fangio, Stirling Moss and Jackie Stewart.

But the most amazing experience happened last week in Los Angeles when I rode alongside... no one. On a visit to see son Seb, who works as a doctor there, we hailed an electric Waymo Jaguar; 100 of these driverless i-Paces ply LA’s streets and I’d noticed one when, in a shopping-centre car park, it hooted at a reversing pick-up. The driver got out of his truck to check he really had been honked by an empty car and an AI algorithm.

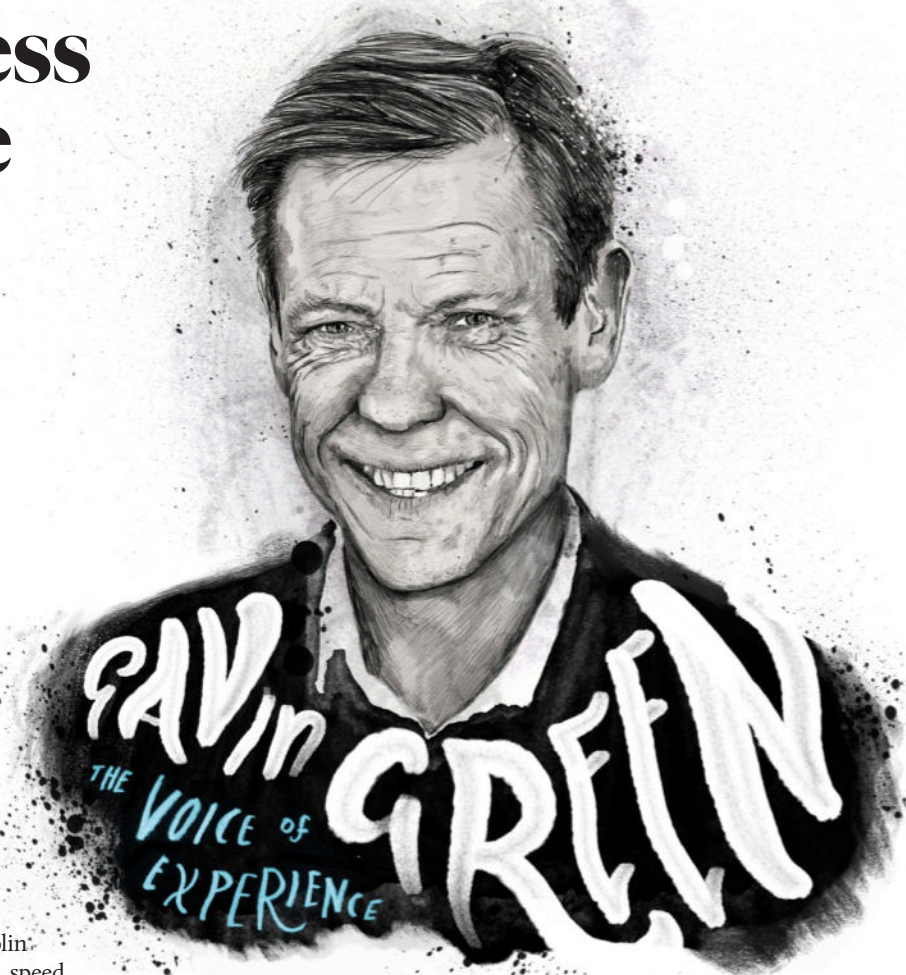
A few days later, Seb hailed a Waymo Jaguar on the app. He set the pick-up point – just around the corner from his house – and the destination, Palisades Park in Santa Monica, right on the Pacific ocean.

After a brief wait, the empty Jaguar glided up the street and neatly parked. Seb’s phone said the car had arrived and his initials flashed on the roof-mounted crown. His app unlocked the car.

A voice assistant welcomed us. Doors shut and seatbelts on and, with a warning not to touch the steering wheel, we were off. I sat in the front, Mrs Green and Seb in the rear. This No Driver was a good driver – brisk, assertive, driving at the speed limit. And smooth as a pro. Gentle on the brakes, always anticipating pedestrians, red lights and other cars threatening to do stupid things.

For about a minute or so, we were in a state of disbelief. Then, most impressive of all, it felt incredibly normal, although the sight of the steering wheel twirling smoothly, no hand attached, driver’s seat vacant, remained a marvel and a mystery.

To deliver such techno magic, the i-Pace has rooftop lidar, which uses lasers to measure distances to nearby objects and builds a 3D picture of the car’s surroundings. Cameras, lidar, sensors and radar



are incorporated in pods on the front wings and elsewhere, plus algorithms I can neither comprehend nor explain.

One of the seriously big brains behind it all is German-born former Stanford University professor Sebastian Thrun, who I’ve been following for years. He was a Google vice-president, is a long-time driverless-car advocate, and a founder of the Waymo project. Waymo is now the autonomous-driving subsidiary of Google, or Alphabet as it’s known today.

Thrun is driven by safety and especially saving young people. More than 95 per cent of accidents are caused by human error. Self-driving cars, in theory, should not make mistakes.

So far, Waymos haven’t made many. The fleet operates in LA, San Francisco, Phoenix and, through Uber, in Austin, Texas. They now rack up over one million rides a month. Between July 2024 and February 2025, they were involved in 38 accidents. One was the robo-taxi’s fault. It hit a plastic crate, pushing it into the path of a scooter. In 2023, a Waymo car hit and killed a dog. It identified it but couldn’t avoid the poor pooch.

Two rides in a Waymo Jaguar have turned me from an autonomous-driving sceptic to a believer. They’re coming, and London is likely to be one of the first European cities.

But they’re not perfect. In January, one drove around in circles at an LA airport car park, in what Waymo described as a ‘routing issue’. The frustrated passenger almost missed his flight. And last year the 300 Waymo Jaguars operating in San Francisco received 589 parking tickets, racking up \$65,000 in fines. They may be able to follow the rules of the road perfectly, but they clearly aren’t so good at knowing where to park.

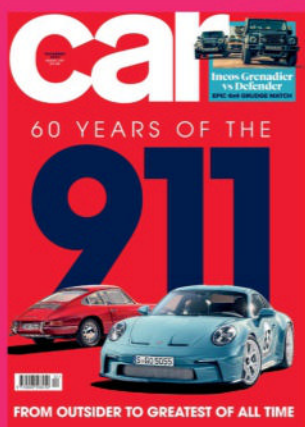
Former CAR editor Gavin Green is now one of the world’s foremost commentators on automotive matters, with an eternally open mind

Peter Strain

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'Like a 1970s Porsche or '80s Merc, the Volvo V70 felt over-engineered; designed for the long haul'



I bought a Volvo. Yes, with my own money, and yes, I did it after our eBay feature, not before.

This, I hasten to add, is not a usual occurrence for me. I drove a Lamborghini Revuelto last year – didn't buy one. Drove a McLaren 750S – didn't buy one. Tested a Rolls-Royce Ghost – did not immediately go down to a dealer to put in an

order. But something about that knackered, high-mileage, £1500 Swedish *lådva* got under my skin.

I appreciate that Man Buys Old Volvo isn't exactly headline news, but as a car journalist I find people are often interested in what I choose to buy with my own cash, so I thought I'd share.

Read the story in this issue to get the background on how I found myself in an old Volvo estate. Everything I describe in the feature is absolutely true – I really was struck by the V70's character, its integrity. Its build quality reminded me of driving a '70s Porsche or a '80s Mercedes – the heavy clunk of the door, the sturdiness of the switchgear, the firmness of the dashboard plastics. The V70 possessed that same feeling of being over-engineered, designed for the long haul – I kept imagining those hardy Volvo engineers, working in the dark at the company's test facility in Kiruna, Lapland. In my mind they're there, enduring frigid temperatures and snowstorms, just to ensure the pop-out cupholder operates at -30°C. 'Ja, perfekt!'

If the V70 feels like it was signed off by people who cared more about a brand promise than pure profit, that's probably because it was. Introduced in 2000, this second-generation V70 (known as the P2) was the last true Volvo-made Volvo before the company was sold to Ford in 1999. The next generation – the P3, launched in 2007 – was essentially a rebodied Ford Mondeo. The P2 really counted for something, and it shows.

So I got home after our coast-to-coast eBay trip and I couldn't stop thinking about it. And then a cunning plan started to form in my mind: we're in need of a new family workhorse, something to lug around muddy dogs and kids; we've been hovering around a second-hand Discovery Sport, maybe a leased Dacia Jogger... How about we risk it on a 20-year-old Volvo instead?

Like all blokes about to make a purchase, I then went down the internet rabbit hole of research. We needed four-wheel drive to get

up a Welsh mountain track, so it had to be the XC70 – essentially the same car but with raised suspension and Haldex 4x4. And while my petrol/manual eBay car was enjoyable I needed better mpg, so I ended up looking at the five-cylinder diesel, the legendary D5, with an auto 'box. Pre-2005 Euro 3 models are the simplest; after that the engine got cleaner but also more complicated, with particulate filters and swirl flaps in the air intake, but they're still absolutely bombproof, renowned for plodding on for 300,000 miles.

So, with all the advice saying I should look at the service record not the mileage, I ended up buying a 2007 car, one of the last P2s, with two owners, a full history and 130,000 miles on the clock. I paid £3800 for it, though the radio was broken (a blown sound board – a common fault). That cost £200 to fix, through Trowbridge-based Revive Car Audio – and while the system was out I added a Bluetooth adaptor, a £30 eBay purchase that plugs into an aux socket in the back of the head unit.

It feels like a lot of car for the money. The dark blue paintwork is certainly 'lived-in' but overall it's in good condition. It has a charcoal grey leather interior with aluminium trim, which is a plus (lots of examples have a yellow-beige leather and 'old Jag'-spec wooden dashboards). The leather is still in amazing condition, like polished rhino hide. Yes, the D5 engine is coarse at low speeds, when it sounds like a bus pulling away from a stop; and yes, the handling is elastic like a '70s Cadillac DeVille. But late at night, cruising along a motorway on a long journey, the interior glows like it's lit by a candle, and the car feels calm and comforting. It's like hiding from an arctic blizzard inside a log cabin – dense, quiet and secure. Keep your Revuelos – I absolutely love it.

Long-term readers of Mark's column are doubtless reeling, but it's true: the old Subaru estate has gone, replaced by an old Volvo estate

Peter Strain

Hit the road

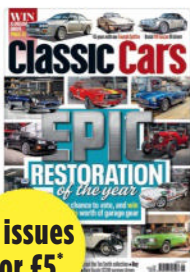
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THE CAR THAT SHOULDN'T EXIST

Alfa Romeo has no business making something as rare and expensive as the 33 Stradale, does it? Let's drive it and find out

Words James Dennison Photography Olgun Kordal







Owners can expect to be asked to do this a lot

O

n the face of it, we've been here before. A two-seat, mid-engined supercar (red, at that), dripping in motorsport heritage and pretty as a pressed rose, flitting through a quick left-right chicane before sending 600bhp-plus to the rear wheels and launching forth under bright, clear Italian skies. A small crowd

has formed at the side of the road, desperate to steal a glimpse of the Italian institution blurring back and forth before their eyes.

Aware of the audience, my grip on the steering wheel tightens. Lavished in the finest leather, its delicate form telegraphs crucial data into my palms as the front end bites hungrily into the braking zone. Click-click. A perfect double flare of rev-matching from the dual-clutch 'box and we're down to second, eyeballs darting left to the apex. Torque vectoring, an e-diff, perhaps even a bit of good old-fashioned left-hand-down sends me rotating towards mid-corner, and in a flash I'm through and shifting my right foot towards the loud pedal. Third, fourth, fifth – here we go again.

Such a scene is synonymous with Ferrari – the darling of luxury Italian brands – but today the Prancing Horse is nowhere to be seen. We're 150 miles north-west of Maranello, our immediate environment the Balocco test facility in the shadow of the Italian Alps.

Bold and beautiful, the Alfa Romeo 33 Stradale is a re-imagining of the 1967 33 Stradale (itself a road-going version of the Tipo 33 racer). Every example will be assembled by hand and set its owner back around £2.5m. Production started in 2024 and will end in 2027. Of the 33 that will be delivered, all of them are already spoken for and no two share the same spec.

Shocked? Me too. For the last 20 years or so (every since the 8C's short production run came to an end), it's looked for all the world as if Alfa Romeo's run of petrol-powered, mid-engined supercars would fizzle out with a whimper. Sure, the Giulia and Stelvio Quadrifoglio models broke the mould. But since 2016 we've seen just two new Alfa Romeo models – both of them safe but unspectacular SUVs.

So why choose now to launch one of the most jaw-dropping halo cars we've ever seen? And where exactly did such a car come from? After all, it's not every day – or even every decade – that the maker of stylish yet sensible saloons and SUVs suddenly delivers a seven-figure supercar to make those over at Lamborghini, Porsche and even Ferrari for once taste the bitter air of envy.

According to Alfa, the 33 Stradale was created to deliver 'a manifesto' of the Italian brand's capabilities and 'an ideal link' between the internal-combustion engines of the past and the electric future. While the car has been launched with a 3.0-litre twin-turbo V6, an all-electric version will follow.

The 33 Stradale that's briefly mine is a V6. Numbered 00 (and thus the only one built outside of the 33 customer allocation), its Villa d'Este red paintwork and gold 20-inch Tributo wheels look like a configuration worthy of the original.

Under the skin, the carbonfibre monocoque is borrowed from the Maserati MC20 while aluminium subframes front and rear house Alfa's own dual-arm suspension with active shock absorbers and ►



semi-virtual steering on both axles. 'Semi-virtual steering'? It's an Alfa system using two lower levers, hinged differently and operating in a scissors motion that reduces the impact of wheel movement on the steering feel.

The body itself – made from a combination of carbon and aluminium – has no active aero features at the request of customers who wanted clean, swooping lines free of moving hardware. That is, until you open the doors. Swinging upwards in an 'elytra' configuration (like a beetle's forewing), they cut into the roof (a feature designed to make entry possible on the incredibly low original 33 Stradale). Threading myself inside is straightforward, while the cabin, too, is mercifully devoid of complication.

It's not bereft of screens – there's a 10.25-inch 'telescope' instrument cluster and 10.25-inch infotainment screen – but the former is well-integrated while the latter hides behind the fascia at the touch of a button. And there's no lack of physical buttons. The centre console houses gear selector levers (one activating auto or manual forward gears, the other for reverse) as well as switches for the drive modes and suspension settings, while up in the roof lining a central bank of switches looks after the windows and other auxiliary features. The upshot is that all of this is kept away from the gorgeous, thin, button-less steering wheel. Bravo.

I'd like to see the pedals more central and the driving position slightly lower, but as you twist the brushed metal starter switch in the centre console and look out and around at the bright blue sky pouring in through the huge glasshouse, it's hard not to attain a level of feverish excitement.

The bark on start-up is a familiar tone. The 621bhp 3.0-litre V6 engine is an evolution of the engine developed for the Giulia Quadrifoglio. Since then it's been beefed up for the Giulia GTA and latterly the Maserati MC20. The eight-speed DCT gearbox is borrowed from

Maserati's halo car and differs from the eight-speed ZF that Alfa has recently used in its spiciest models. The large metal paddles have, thankfully, been carried over.

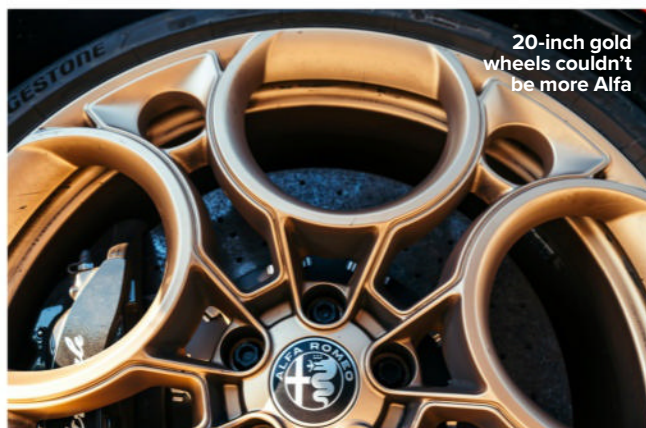
The upshot of this part sharing is that, unusually for a £2.5 million supercar, I have some idea of what to expect as we roll out onto the winding, flat Balocco test track. Alfa is adamant the 33 Stradale has been created as a road car, and during low-speed manoeuvres it does indeed feel as approachable as an MC20. Easy to place, easy to drive and with plenty of give in the set-up, there's no excuse to keep the 33 Stradale as a garage queen (you even get a nose-lift function as standard). Indeed, part of the selection process for clients included identifying those who would actually use the car on a semi-regular basis.

Twist the drive mode selector into Pista, however – engine to max attack, highest pedal sensitivity, exhaust valve open above 3500 revs, suspension firm – and there's a marked difference. Everything gains an edge. Gone is the feeling that you're cruising around in a rolling Mona Lisa. Out of nowhere the £2.5m price has moved to the back of my mind and I'm gunning for apex kerbs like I'm in a mass-produced hot hatch in Wales. The MC20 was brilliant at delivering this level of confidence early on in a drive and the 33 goes one step further.

At 1550kg it's on the lighter side for a modern supercar. The e-diff and all-round semi-virtual steering work together with a front end so positive and responsive that you quickly feel comfortable pushing the 33 Stradale right up to its limits. Such is the ease with which it delivers this performance, it doesn't take long before I begin to feel the Bridgestone Potenza Sports gradually let go as the marginally front-limited balance reveals itself.

The braking system – brake-by-wire with carbon ceramic Brembo hardware developed for the 33 Stradale – takes some getting used to. The initial push on the pedal is met by noticeable travel, with the eventual bite taking a few attempts to extract the desired consistency in stopping power. Just as I begin to get my head around the left pedal, I spy an Alfa Romeo Giulia GTA on a lap up ahead. Even with me driving cautiously on an unfamiliar track, the 33 Stradale reels in what was Alfa Romeo's fastest road car within seconds. As it should, of course, but the feeling aboard the 33 Stradale is one of total familiarity and confidence. Hell, show me a 296 and I'd plant myself on its gearbox and rekindle the old rivalry. ►

HELL, SHOW ME A FERRARI 296 AND I'D PLANT MYSELF ON ITS GEARBOX AND REKINDLE THE OLD RIVALRY





Nose-lift is
standard
for lumpier
surfaces



Black for the
functional
bits, red for
the beauty



Speaking of Ferrari's supercar, the 33 Stradale shows there's another way to do 3.0-litre twin-turbo V6 without going hybrid. It feels like a Giulia GTA with the turbos turned up and a touch more rasp to the engine note. Alfa won't confirm just how close it is to the MC20's Nettuno engine, but the identical bore and stroke, power figure and 11:1 compression ratio tell you any differences are minor.

Is that enough for a car of this ilk? Given the price, I don't think it would be unfair to expect more. But it does the job. And where exactly was Stellantis going to get its hands on a superior powertrain? Clicking down through the gears, it's also clear the eight-speed DCT gives a much-needed edge to the shifts that the ZF unit used in previous hot Alfas simply couldn't deliver.

Could the 33 be better? Quite possibly. But there's much to ►

YOUR 33 STRADALE BUYING GUIDE (JUST IN CASE YOU WIN THE LOTTERY)

Can I collect it from the factory?

Yes. According to Alfa's Cristiano Fiorio, some clients want to get the car at the factory or museum (but not necessarily drive it away from there), but the majority will be handed over by the local dealer, amid the Tonales and Juniors. Since the car is sold directly by Alfa Romeo, having the dealer do the handover is a good way to make them feel involved. Aftersales care will largely be down to the dealers.

Will it race?

No. Alfa has entered a contract with the buyers that stipulates they will not build more than 33 cars (plus the 00 we're driving) – all of which are designed to be road legal and usable every day.

What happens if I crash my 33 Stradale?

Fiorio reckons Alfa will be able to fix cars overseas and will have a flying doctor on standby. Alfa has also acknowledged the difficulties 8C owners continue to face if they need servicing and repairs, and doesn't want

to make the same mistakes with the 33. After 15 years all of the technical specifications will be treated as open source, so in theory anyone can service and repair the 33 Stradale.

Will there be more limited-edition Alfas?

Fiorio says: 'We owe it to ourself, to the company, to go back and ask for project number two. What we did deserves to be leveraged.'

What if someone wants to sell theirs?

First, they must wait 33 months from delivery (see what they did there?). Fiorio admits he wouldn't sue anyone for breaking this agreement, but they would find themselves firmly on the blacklist. Then Alfa will try to steer the seller towards someone on the waiting list. If the seller finds a buyer willing to pay a certain sum, Alfa will try to find someone on their waiting list willing to match that price.

Has Valtteri Bottas ordered one?

Yes. In red.

celebrate in the fact that it exists at all. At the beginning of the project, in 2022, Stellantis was far from convinced. Cristiano Fiorio is the now the head of global marketing and communications for Alfa Romeo but before landing this role he oversaw the 33 Stradale project from the start, working with then CEO and visionary Jean-Philippe Imparato. Fiorio loves this car like he loves his wife and children, and is very open in talking me through the main difficulties he faced trying to get the whole thing off the ground.

‘Let’s just say everyone was against it in the company. Because we had a company that produces civilian cars they thought that this [the 33 Stradale] would defocus our daily job.’ Perhaps they had a point – after all, who wouldn’t be distracted by a supercar when the daily grind is launching e-SUVs? But even when the 33 got the green light the project was very much a skunkworks start-up within Stellantis.

‘We created a bunch of passionate people and we did tonnes of weekends and nights working on this because we understand that we were writing a new page and a new chapter of the brand.’

Fiorio’s promise to keep the venture separate from the day-to-day business even extended to the actual production of the car. The 33 Stradale is being built away from other Alfa Romeo models at the coachbuilder Carrozzeria Touring Superleggera, headquartered in Milan and responsible for many of Alfa’s finest body designs.

A modern reimagining of a classic design – especially one as gorgeous as the original 33 Stradale – is risky but it’s hard to argue that the end result is anything short of spectacular. Just like the original, the proportions are perfectly balanced, while there’s a clear distinction between the ‘technical’ carbon surfaces and sculpted panels.

Each client was involved from the start of the project, with frequent workshops and dinners (at a ‘normal’ Italian restaurant, not a ‘fancy’ one according to Fiorio), with Imparato joining them at the dinners. The feedback was strong, Fiori tells me, with buyers re-



Uncluttered wheel, elegant paddles. Nice

EVEN WHEN THE PROJECT GOT THE GREEN LIGHT IT WAS RUN LIKE A SKUNK WORKS, NOT INTERFERING WITH THE DAY JOB

marking that while they had many excellent experiences buying cars from brands like Bugatti and Ferrari, they had never felt part of a family like they had with the 33 Stradale.

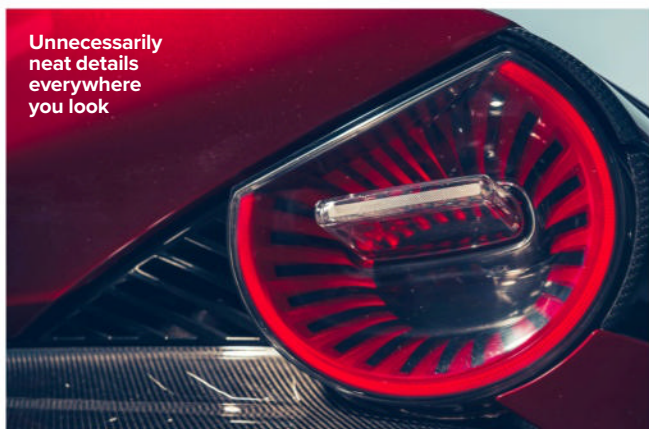
Part of the customer process involved collaborating with the Bottega, the Alfa Romeo team responsible for working in close contact with the buyers to help deliver the exact spec they’re after. The Bottega is headquartered in the Alfa museum in Arese, where the design of the original 33 Stradale was approved in 1967.

Clients have thousands of customisation options. There are three base body colours, but customers can request any colour they like. Same goes for the brake calipers and headlamp internals, while the badges are – understandably – a little more tightly controlled. You can even elect to cover the carbon outlet on the rear haunches for a more classical look to the rear end.

It’s a similar story for the cabin, where a choice of two styling themes – Tributo (think traditional leather) and Alfa Corse (sportier, more alcantara) – form the baseline of yet further customisation. What’s more, the last eight digits of the VIN number (stamped on the central tunnel) are chosen by the original owner to act as their signature. There was a plan to etch customers’ initials into each of the 33 stripes circling the headlight unit, but this was ultimately dismissed over concerns that the cars may actually be sold on at some point.

All customisation requests have to make their way past the 33 Committee (chaired by the CEO of the company, no less) in order to ensure each configuration is unique and to gently guide buyers away from a spec that’s – *ahem* – not in keeping with the history and heritage of the Alfa Romeo brand... You will not ruin our creation, sir.

It’s pretty special. Special enough; quick enough? Boiling the 33 Stradale down to marginal dynamic assessments feels like missing the point. If we’d had more time in the car we might have more to say about its 207mph top speed and 3.0sec 0-62mph time. But that’s like filling in a feedback form after a ride on a unicorn. Because if ever you begin to question whether the 33 Stradale could be improved in any way, you simply need pull over, step out and take a moment to look at what you’re driving. Perhaps that’s the biggest problem with this car. It doesn’t matter how well it stops, steers or goes, those who own it will always be getting the worst view. **car**



Unnecessarily neat details everywhere you look



Door seals definitely not off the shelf

ALFA ROMEO 33 STRADALE

PRICE £2.5m

POWERTRAIN 2992cc 24v twin-turbocharged V6, eight-speed dual-clutch auto, rear-wheel drive

PERFORMANCE 621bhp @ 7500rpm, 538lb ft @ 3000rpm, 3.0sec 0-62mph, 207mph

WEIGHT 1550kg

EFFICIENCY 24.1mpg (official), 265g/km CO2

ON SALE Now (33 units, all sold)

★★★★★



**WATCH
THE VIDEO!**

GET CAR'S
DIGITAL EDITION –
SEE PAGE 82



WHY WE JUST CAN'T QUIT ALFA ROMEO

Why we still love Italy's yo-yoing
powerhouse of passion

Words Chris Chilton Photography Mark Riccioni



The still-gorgeous 8C – yours for circa £240k



N

ewcastle United recently pulled off a shock win in UK football's Carabao Cup, demolishing Premier League leaders Liverpool to break a 57-year run in which the only silverware they took home was spoon-shaped and made of wood. Most of the NUFC supporters weren't even born when the Magpies last lifted a cup, but some-

how the mythology of the club's '50s heyday and occasional flashes of brilliance since then have kept the brand alive and loved. Fans willing to overlook the disappointments have kept on hoping each year that this season might be the one. Fans at the other big clubs probably wondered why they bothered.

Alfa Romeo's dry spells have never been quite that arid, but it's not hard to see the parallels. Here's a brand with a rich history and passionate fan base, but one whose tales of straight-armed derring-do are mostly now so far away in the hat-wearing past it's as if they were pulled off by an entirely different company (many were, before the 1986 sale to Fiat). A brand whose succession of new managers have promised much but frequently left the club hovering above the relegation zone. A brand that ought to be Italy's BMW, but sells around one car for every 37 the Munich manufacturer does. A brand that too many modern car buyers simply don't get.

So what is it about Alfa that keeps a small but dedicated band of fans coming back for more? What is it that convinces the company's owners it's worth persevering with when financial results say otherwise? And why can't Alfa sell more cars?

To understand Alfa Romeo, you have to start at the track. The

brand might have flunked out of F1 in 2023, having failed to win a single race in five years of trying, but it has plenty of other victories to crow about if you're prepared to cast the net a little further back. Because for much of the last century the history of Alfa was the history of motorsport.

Born in 1910 as ALFA (Anonima Lombarda Fabbrica Automobili), the company began fielding cars in the legendary Targa Florio Sicilian road race as soon as the following year. It scored its first win there in 1923 with the now iconic Quadrifoglio four-leaf-clover logo on the bonnet, and in 1925 bagged the inaugural automobile world championship, the precursor to the modern F1 championship. Alfa went on to become one of the dominant names in Grand Prix racing through the rest of that decade and into the early '30s until the irritatingly win-prone Germans spoiled the fun (and not for the last time).

Starting in the late '40s, when racing battles once again replaced the guns, tanks and bombs type, Alfa recovered its winning mojo, claiming the maiden F1 season in 1950 and repeating the feat a year later. Then, short of funds and feeling the heat from a certain Enzo Ferrari – who got his break racing for Alfa Romeo, ran its team and then founded his own – Alfa recused itself.

It changed tack, doubled down on racing sports cars and saloons, beat Porsche in the Trans Am series and crushed the class opposition in European Touring Car competition in the '60s, '70s and early '80s. It added another hat trick of ETCC titles in the first three years of the new millennium, and peppered the half-century-long post-war period with a couple of sportscar world championships, class victories at Le Mans, Sebring and the Nürburgring, and the odd rally win. No question, Alfa's motorsport pedigree is blue-chip stuff, if now a little scuffed around the edges with age.

And it's not just racing that cemented the legend. Alfa Romeo has given us some of the most achingly beautiful road cars in history, often leveraging the talents of legendary Italian design houses like Pininfarina, Zagato and Bertone, and later, proving that its own ►



The back catalogue is uncommonly sexy



Fire in the Disco (Volante)

Sergio Marchionne reckoned sales of 500,000 units per year were within reach. It never happened. Not even close

Centro Stile in-house team was every bit as capable. From the 6Cs of the '30s and '40s to the 33 Stradale of the '60s, and the 8C earlier this century, Alfas often rub shoulders with Ferrari and Aston Martin in beauty polls. Its name has graced some of the craziest concepts, too, including Nuccio Bertone's BAT studies and Gandini's Carabo, effectively a dry run for his more famous Lamborghini Countach. And the cars you could buy for vaguely real-world money were often also beautiful, while those that weren't were at least interesting.

Appearances on the silver screen only helped reinforce the legend. Who approaching pensionable age can forget *The Graduate's* Dustin Hoffman running out of petrol in his rush to halt Katherine Ross's wedding, Roger Moore and a BMW-beating GTV6 giving *Octopussy* its one redeeming feature, and Bond again, this time being chased by 159s in *Quantum of Solace*? Or Edward Fox repainting his Giulietta Spider midway through the *Day of the Jackal* to evade the police – and maybe just deal with some of those typical Alfa rust spots.

There was almost always engineering substance to go with that glamour, too, much of it developed through racing. Alfa was using twin-cam heads when plenty of American and European firms were still pushing side-valve motors. Equipping its sports saloons with rear transaxles for perfect weight distribution – just like front-engined Ferraris – and five-speed transmissions when nose-heavy rivals had only four. Adjusting valve timing on the fly years before anyone had heard of VTEC, and rocking smooth common-rail power when everyone else was still peddling rattly, smoky, old-tech diesels.

Some of the innovations never quite took off, like the Q-System H-pattern shifter for the 166's four-speed automatic transmission (the idea's primed for a comeback in the EV age via Toyota). But the same era's Selespeed sequential manual presaged a DSG revolution, and even the ideas that didn't hit at least showed that Alfa was always thinking about the driver.

It's a shame it wasn't always thinking about the owner at the same time. Cars like the boxer-engined Sud were great to drive but quality issues wrecked the brand's reputation for years. The hit-and-miss design and dynamics that characterised the following period didn't help. The '80s and early '90s had their highs (164) and lows (the weird Nissan Cherry-based Arna) and a load of cars like the 33, 145 and 155 that were good in parts but lacking overall.

You could level the same complaint at the Mito and Giulietta, but for most of the past 25 years Alfas have looked great and had the chassis moves to back up the swagger. From the 156 that put the company back on the map in 1998 to the modern Giulia and Stelvio, the cars haven't been perfect. But they've made us lust after them, and love driving them, even if too few of us acted on those urges.

Ask an accountant, and they'll tell you Alfa should have died years ago. In 2001, riding high after a successful reboot that gave us the gorgeous 156 saloon and son-of-Sud 147 (and with them Alfa's first two Car of the Year gongs), Alfa sold 213,000 cars. Not bad, but definitely room for improvement: FCA's then boss Sergio Marchionne reckoned 500k was in reach by the middle of the decade. It never happened. Not even close.

Last year Alfa sold around 65,000 cars, down from more than 70,000 in 2023, and that's with the benefit of access to the huge US market, something off limits in the 156's day, Alfa having bailed on

America in 1995. Porsche, supposedly a niche player, sold almost 51,000 examples of the 911 alone in 2024, and more than 300,000 cars overall. BMW found over 2.2 million customers in the same 12-month period.

Some of the blame can be laid on the Italians' limited line-up. BMW and Audi have more than a dozen different models when Alfa had only three during most of 2024. Even Porsche has eight. Alfa also has only one plug-in hybrid, and didn't get an EV until the Junior launched last year.

I know the idea will horrify Alfa diehards, but you have to wonder if Alfa would be better off in BMW's hands, or VW's. Think of the platforms and tech it could have easily accessed over the past decade. It could have happened. Back in 2018 a VW team approached Alfa's then owner FCA about acquiring the company on the urging of former boss Ferdinand Piëch, the man who had masterminded VW's massively successful takeovers of Bentley, Lamborghini and Bugatti, and who a few years earlier had suggested Alfa could flourish under Porsche's control. FCA knocked them back, believing it could turn Alfa round; and now, in Cupra, VW has created its own Alfa Romeo. One that shifted almost 250,000 cars last year.

Loving Alfa Romeo has rarely been logical; it's been about making memories, the kind you don't make in a gussied-up Seat. My personal odometer just ticked past 50 years and I must have driven thousands of cars in that time. Most of them I've forgotten, but not the raspy 33 I worked on as a mechanic in the '90s or the used V6 GTV I bought for then editor Phil McNamara (he loved it less when it very quickly and expensively went wrong). And in years to come I'll remember the pop of the Montreal Green paint and physics-defying B-road fireworks of the Stelvio Quadrifoglio I ran for six months long after I've expunged the awful ride and ropey media system from my memory banks.

But Cupra's recent rise – or Audi's longer-term one – proves most modern buyers don't care about heritage that comes in Pathé film canisters and don't want to have to excuse flaws as 'character'. They want cars that look good and feel relatively polished in all respects, even if they're not always as exciting to drive as machines like the Giulia. The fact that Alfa has amassed a huge 30,000-unit order bank for the new Junior suggests it's on their wavelength and Stellantis was right to hang onto the brand.

If Alfa maintains that incredible momentum with the upcoming electric and combustion Giulia, Stelvio and its planned Porsche Cayenne-sized big brother, there's a chance my kids won't be boring their kids about why Alfa Romeo still matters. They'll already know. And if they do it'll be because of what Alfa has achieved this century, not what it did in the last. **car**



Lime sorbet with a dollop of scarlet sauce



HOW TO SOLVE A PROBLEM LIKE ALFA

Santo Ficili is Alfa's new CEO. He knows he has a task on his hands

'I think that we have an unbelievable story and glory if you look at our past. So what I'm imagining for the future, and also for the present, is that we need to find the right position in the market, starting from our legacy.' Santo Ficili is the man tasked with taking Alfa Romeo into the future and is stepping into some big shoes: the presence of Sergio Marchionne still reverberates through the Alfa narrative, while Ficili's direct predecessor, Jean-Philippe Imparato, had the double bonus of a clear plan and being best mates with Stellantis' then-CEO Carlos Tavares. To complicate matters, JPI is still at Stellantis so has the potential to mark Ficili's homework.

But his personal history stands him in good stead. He began his automotive career as a Fiat service advisor in Turin, where he was born. Over the next 38 years, he rose through the ranks and now oversees everything Alfa Romeo and Maserati. He knows the brands inside out, but does Ficili believe there's a danger Alfa Romeo is relying too heavily on its – admittedly vast – heritage and legacy?

'I don't want to become too romantic, looking at the past, you know? But this [the heritage] is a fact that we need to keep in mind. Based on an unbelievable legacy of this brand, starting from this, we need to work in the present with the range we have. And for sure, we need to look ahead, considering the evolution of new models that we will prepare for the future.'

'Alfa Romeo is the only premium brand that we [Stellantis] have.'

But if the brand is so strong and far reaching, why doesn't Alfa Romeo sell more cars – even if we're not talking millions? For Ficili, there's one clear area that he feels needs addressing, and given his background it's not a surprising one.

'We need to have the right network. I'm always repeating that we need the

THERE'S A DANGER ALFA ROMEO IS RELYING TOO MUCH ON ITS HERITAGE AND IS TOO SLOW TO ROLL OUT NEW MODELS

Those new models can't come a moment too soon. Alongside the ageing Giulia and Stelvio, the Tonale is 'doing the job' while the Junior – the marque's first EV – is already up to 54,000 orders. But what counts as success for the brand as a whole?

Ficili errs on the side of realism – 'I'm not imagining to deliver millions of cars. What is important to me is to cover the space of our firm – and we see space. For example, we have 350 car clubs worldwide.' He expands:

right dealers, not only to sell the car, but also to serve our customers in the aftersales activity in the workshops.' Ficili adds: 'If you ask me, "Are you satisfied about the performance?" I think that there is always something to do better. For sure, we can. We can do better now.'

Get this right and Ficili is confident. 'The sky is the limit – this brand gives us the possibility to invent everything we want.'

JAMES DENNISON

WHEELS





WILL IT EVER GET THERE

Worried new cars
are no fun? Let the
Defender Octa and
new Ariel Nomad put
your mind at ease

Words Mark Walton Photography Jordan Butters



In the war of
Ariel versus
soil, we have a
winner

A

s I take off, I realise this could be the longest jump I've ever done. I know I'm airborne because of the silence – the harsh, gravelly hiss of stones has stopped battering the floor. But I feel calm, like I'm in a slow-motion *Dukes of Hazzard* jump. I reach into the centre console and take out a mint humbug. The wrapper proves a little fiddly. Best check how the flight is going – as any *Hazzard* fan will tell you, it's always the

landing that splits the General Lee in half. But I'm not worried. With my parabolic trajectory almost complete, the windscreen is now filled with my landing spot, a patch of gravel several metres down the road. I pop the sweet in my mouth, straighten the steering and – with a small, dusty *skiddoosh* – land on all four wheels. No drama, no fuss – and proof that this Defender Octa is simply in a different league.

Jumping is all part of the fun when you're driving fast off-road – jumping, sliding, scattering stones in your wheel-spinning wake. And when I say off-road, I'm not talking about getting winched out of a bog or crawling over a boulder. I'm mean Baja-style, foot-to-the-floor rally driving, the kind of off-road that's inspired new cars like the Lamborghini Huracan Sterrato and Porsche 911 Dakar.

And now two more join the gang – both British, both magnificently engineered, both ludicrously expensive. Neither is a car you need, but I'm just going to park that consideration for now, and focus on

the way they're built, the way they drive.

Of course, the new Defender Octa is the more conventional of the pair, but in the metal it has much more presence than you might imagine if, like me, you've only seen photos. When I first stand next to it, it's impossible not to be impressed with its stance; those bulging wheelarches and the detailing around the grille in that big, blunt nose. Referring not to the *Octonauts* kids' TV programme, nor to an octopus, the new top-of-the-range Defender is named after the octahedron shape of a diamond – 'a rare combination of extreme toughness and luxury', the marketing blurb purrs.

This example – with its Petra Copper paint, a £4000 protective matt coating and the rally-inspired 20-inch wheels and knobbly tyres (a £5000 option) – looks absolutely brutal parked on my street, part organised crime, part Operation Desert Storm. My neighbours are in shock and awe. This example costs a staggering £155k, more than double the standard Defender's starting price.

The justification for that hike is hidden under the skin. The Octa is powered by a BMW-derived 626bhp 4.4-litre twin-turbo V8 and it has dramatically revised suspension, featuring height-adjustable air suspension with hydraulically linked, semi-active dampers, similar to the system found in a McLaren 750S. With longer and tougher wishbones, it sits 28mm higher and 68mm wider than other Defenders. It has uprated front brake discs, new Brembo calipers and a faster steering rack.

Next to this warrior SUV you'll find a spidery looking insect called the Nomad. This goggle-eyed dune buggy is a bizarre slice of British eccentricity that would take me all day to explain, so I'm going to assume you know the back story. Let me summarise: first there was the Ariel Atom, then came the Nomad, now there's a Nomad 2. Simple. ►



**THE OCTA IS THE BEST SUV I'VE EVER
DRIVEN – MORE ENGAGING THAN A RANGE
ROVER SV, MORE COMMUNICATIVE THAN A
MERCEDES G. A NEW BENCHMARK**





Nomad would
surely be
Chapman
approved



Nomad relishes
a good battle
with gravity



NOW, AFTER YEARS OF WAITING, THE NOMAD HAS BEEN SUBJECTED TO THE SAME BLACK MAGIC AS THE ATOM



No, wait, I missed an important step: first came Atoms 1, 2 and 3 and then (insert choir of angels singing from the heavens) there came the Atom 4 in 2018, a transformational step forward for this tiny Somerset-based company. How did they do it? I don't know, but the Atom 4 is automotive voodoo, sensationally fast and so sophisticated in its ride and handling that it is *supernaturally* good over a bumpy British back road. Now, after years of waiting, the Nomad has been subjected to the same black magic.

Ignore what your eyes tell you – even though it looks the same as the original of 2015, the new Nomad is completely new. It's bigger and wider, it has a new tubular spaceframe, new suspension, a new engine, new gearbox, new bodywork, new everything. The original 2.4-litre Honda engine is replaced by a turbocharged 2.3-litre Ford EcoBoost engine, like the one you'd find in a Focus ST. It drives the rear wheels through Ford's six-speed gearbox and a limited-slip diff, and with some remapping of the ECU it offers 305bhp.

The example you see here is optioned up the eyeballs, with a winch, 18-inch wheels, spotlights and a new 'bikini' soft-top, stretched over your head behind the now standard windscreen. This car also has some serious Bilstein dampers, based around shortened Trophy Truck units and developed specially with Ariel. The Nomad is sold with three damper options: non-adjustable K-Tech units; some adjustable Öhlins (all-rounders if you want to do off-road days and trackdays) and these bad boys, the max-attack, four-way adjusta-

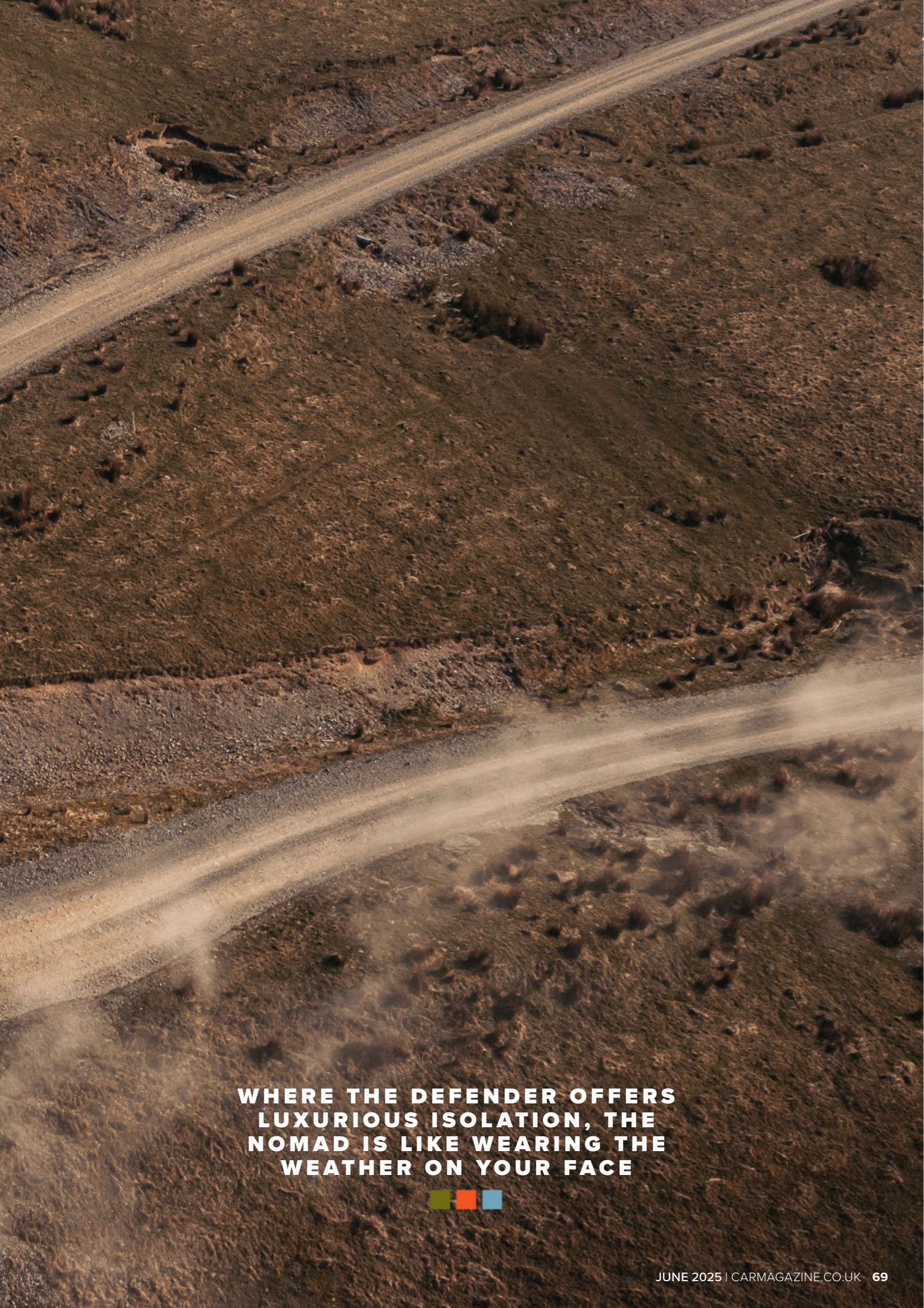
ble Baja choice. Nobody's driven the Nomad on these Bilsteins yet – it's a first for CAR. And the price? Starting from a base of £68k, this example would set you back around £105,000.

We start on the road, heading west to mid-Wales and Sweet Lamb, the legendary rally stage and WRC test facility. I set off in the Defender and the first thing I notice is the Octa's new Performance seats, deeply bolstered but with a curved, seamless appearance, so they look like tan leather armchairs rather than racing buckets. They're comfortable and supportive, and they help elevate what would otherwise be a standard-looking Defender cabin. In fact, in motorway traffic, my first impressions are that the Octa does everything like a regular Defender – the same road manners, the same visibility, the same wind noise, only with added drone from those knobby tyres on the road surface.

But then we peel off the motorway onto a back road and the Octa starts doing things that no other SUV can do. This BMW engine is less thunderous than JLR's old 5.0-litre V8, emitting more of a motor-sport snarl than a Wagnerian bellow, but it is fantastically on-point when you need it to step up. Delve into the Defender's Terrain Response system (or press a button on the steering wheel) – which includes the usual settings for grass, snow, Waitrose car park, etc – and there's a new Octa mode that sharpens everything.

On a twisty road, where you're on and off the power, this V8 is magnificently responsive, punching this 2.5-tonne behemoth out ►





**WHERE THE DEFENDER OFFERS
LUXURIOUS ISOLATION, THE
NOMAD IS LIKE WEARING THE
WEATHER ON YOUR FACE**





NO ONE IS LISTENING TO ME RAVING ABOUT THE OCTA BECAUSE THEY'RE ALL STARING AT THE NOMAD



of corners like a sports saloon half its size.

Even more astonishing is the stability and control of the chassis. Frankly, it's mind-blowing, a blend of bump absorption and solidity – a firmness that keeps every body movement in check but with a suppleness that feels athletic and agile. Arrive hard into a bend and the front turns in sharply and willingly at the first jink of the steering wheel, then you feel the body hunker down until it meets this muscular resistance to the cornering forces. Then the Octa just drives through, without any of the sway or axle shimmy you might expect of a fast SUV. Instead there's just a sweet steering precision and crazy chuckability that makes it a thrill to drive quickly. The Octa is the best SUV I've ever driven – more engaging than a Range Rover SV, more communicative than a Mercedes G. A new benchmark.

Arriving high on the Welsh moors I climb out of the Octa to start raving about it to anyone who'll listen. In fact, no one is listening, because they're all staring at the Nomad instead.

Parked up side by side, there's a weird visual rapport between these two cars. They're chalk and cheese, of course, but there's also a common theme, a shared 'tactical' look, that suggests you might find both in the same SAS convoy, spearing across a desert. The Nomad is also so arresting because it's ugly like an amphibious creature you'd find at the bottom of a garden pond, but also strangely beautiful, in its exposed functionality and welded geometry.

It's also a nightmare to climb into. In CAR's first road test of the

new Nomad, Tim Pollard resorted to climbing onto the roof and dropping into the driver's seat from above, but with the optional soft-top in place I have to clamber through the door. By which I mean 'the door'. I hold my weight using the upper rail and slide my bum onto the tube that forms the door sill. Then – like a contortionist squeezing into a suitcase – I grunt and gasp and twist to poke my legs down the footwell, then drop into the hard plastic seat. Even when you're in, the grunting isn't over because you need to dig down to pull out the four-point harness and get strapped up.

The consolation is, once you're in, worth it: the hard seats are unbelievably comfy and supportive and the driving position is excellent. The interior is spartan, sharing the same rubberised buttons as the Atom, plus this example has a tall, rally-style fly-off handbrake to lock the rear wheels on gravel – I'll play with that later.

The Ford engine starts on the button and a fizzy snarl vibrates your body like there's an angry bumble bee trapped in your pants. With a bootful of revs, I clunk it into first gear, drop the clutch and the Nomad launches like a flyweight boxer out of his corner.

Every sensation is utterly different to the Octa: where the Defender offers luxurious isolation, the Nomad is like wearing the weather on your face; where the Land Rover is studiously calibrated, the Ariel is unprocessed and raw. The unassisted steering, wriggling in your hand, is so direct and alive, and the turbo-whistling acceleration is raucous fun. It's like eating a packet of Hobnobs – once you've had a ►



All-day comfort is a Defender thing. Weirdly, it's also a Nomad thing

GRAVELLING LIGHT

If you want to get off-road, these are the destinations to put in your nav

Pyrenees

There are hundreds of miles of rocky trails that criss-cross the Pyrenees between France and Spain, and if you string them together you can do 750 miles off road from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic.

Passing through pine forests and rocky passes, there are panoramic views at every turn – just make sure you keep an eye on the road, though, because you'll be sharing the tracks with gangs of middle-aged (mostly) men riding BMW GS motorcycles.

Morocco

Morocco may be developing fast and investing billions in its motorway infrastructure, but you'll still find plenty of unpaved tracks in the south. Unlike the twists and turns of the Pyrenees, these gravel tracks along the north-west edge of the Sahara are often fast and empty – though you need to keep an eye out for goats. The routes are often completely unmarked, so take a GPS device... and pack plenty of water.

Albania

One emerging destination worth considering is Albania. The Foreign Office urges visitors to exercise caution, but don't be put off completely. Several companies are now offering guided 4x4 adventures on Albania's empty trails, canyons and mountain passes.



Ariel Nomad and Defender Octa



A most delicious
doughnut



Dirt-ready
rubber doesn't
stop the Octa
excelling on road



Ford engines
love going on
holiday





DRIVING THE NOMAD IS LIKE IS LIKE EATING A PACKET OF HOBNOBS – SO UTTERLY MOREISH



bite, you just can't stop, it's so utterly moreish.

The Nomad chassis is livelier than the Octa too. Where the Defender has everything rigorously tied down, the 715kg Nomad feels lighter and looser on these off-road springs and dampers. The pitch and roll are vastly improved over the original Nomad – which moved around so much, I remember at the time describing it as feeling like you've got a flat tyre or a couple of loose bolts. But the Ariel still squats when you accelerate and sways in the corners, giving it a fluid, squishy gait that's unlike any conventional sports car. You have to dial yourself into it, learn to play with it and trust the direct steering to help scoop things up when you inevitably get out of shape.

There are some similarities to the Octa. The Nomad absorbs bumps and potholes so confidently, I'm soon flying down the road – literally – getting air over the bigger humps. The Nomad lands flat and square with no secondary bounce or scary yaw. Like the Defender, it just settles – soaking up everything a winding British B-road can throw at it.

But what about a bit of winding British off-road? And so we arrive at Sweet Lamb, a gigantic playground of moors, sheep and gravel tracks. I'm absolutely itching to go out in the Ariel first, so I don my helmet and head for the hills.

This car has the optional three-stage ECU fitted, which I switch from Level 3 (the maximum 305bhp and 382lb ft) down to Level 2 (302bhp and 333lb ft) to help manage the wheelspin. There's also an

adjustable traction control, which I turn completely off.

Straight away, on this loose surface, the Nomad is just a bundle of sliding, skating, gravel-spitting joy. Press the throttle hard and the revs will surge and peak like a chainsaw as the rear wheels scramble for grip, the raucous exhaust shattering the air of these peaceful Welsh hills. Despite the wheelspin, the car still launches up these tracks with a mad intensity, so hard and fast it's almost scary with the grass banks and steep drops around you. You have to re-learn that trust, and let the suspension do its work. Because we're not talking cambers and potholes any more. The surface shifts relentlessly between rocks, ruts, gulleys, mounds of gravel and corners that have been swept clean to bare rock. But what felt floaty on the road is now your best friend, soaking up everything and allowing you to focus on the steering and the throttle.

The Nomad now feels sensitive to every movement, and backing off mid-corner will cause the tail to swing out easily. Jab back on the throttle and you can powerslide through the corner with an armful of opposite lock, living out all of your Colin McRae daydreams. In a hairpin you dip the clutch, tug on that tall handbrake lever, nail it in second gear and send the car arcing round like a pendulum. It's such stupid fun, I'm laughing out loud, eating dust and gravel in my helmet – though after a few minutes my forearms are screaming because I'm putting so much effort into that steering. What a car, what an experience. ►

ARIEL NOMAD

PRICE £67,992 (£105,000 as tested)

POWERTRAIN 2276cc 16v
turbocharged four-cylinder, six-speed
manual, rear-wheel drive

PERFORMANCE 305bhp @
5900rpm, 382lb ft @ 2500rpm, 3.4sec
0-62mph, 134mph

WEIGHT 715kg

EFFICIENCY n/a mpg, n/a g/km CO2

ON SALE Now

★★★★★



WHAT'S MOST SURPRISING IS HOW SIMILAR THEY ARE IN TERMS OF OUTRIGHT PACE



I imagine not many people will jump straight from a Nomad into an Octa, back to back, but that's what I do now. My brain has to do a somersault. Suddenly, on this loose surface and with all those obstacles, the Defender feels huge and intimidating. Like the Nomad, it will catapult you over the gravel, all that power and four-wheel drive compensating for its beefy weight; but when you get to a corner it's a different ball game. Without the unfiltered intimacy of the Nomad's steering, it takes a while to build up in the Land Rover.

Despite Octa mode allowing up to 85 per cent of the torque to go to the rear axle, and despite the traction control being switched off, the Defender doesn't slide like the Nomad. That seriousness – the fact that it can't be provoked, even when you're chucking over 600bhp at a gravel track – is disconcerting at first. But then you come to accept this car wasn't designed to drift. It's designed to race in next year's production category of the Dakar Rally. It's designed to just monster loose surfaces.

The pleasure, then, comes in its efficiency, not in any showboating. Drive hard and straight and fast, and the braking is incredible – more reassuring than the Nomad, even – the ride is serene, despite the

rattling of the rocks under the floor. And of course there's the way it jumps, confident and capable, landing with little more than a rubbery bob on its air springs. You end up flinging the Octa at corners, just like the Nomad, but apart from a little tuck and slide mid-corner, it just hammers out the other side, kicking up a towering dust plume the size of a cumulonimbus cloud.

The Defender Octa is absolutely magnificent on and off road – as is the Nomad. What's most surprising is how similar they are, in terms of outright pace. My brain tried to do loads of complex power-to-weight calculations, factoring in rear-wheel drive versus four-wheel drive, but then I decided that was much too complicated. Whatever the reasons, on tarmac and on gravel these two wildly different cars end up strangely neck and neck.

However, the way they do things is so different. On the road the Octa is unreal, scarcely believable, but on the gravel the Nomad rules; it's so light, drifty and playful. Together, they exemplify why so many manufacturers have turned off the mainstream and gone down this performance side road. Leave those speed cameras and traffic jams behind you – these days, off-road is where the fun is at. **car**

LAND ROVER DEFENDER OCTA

PRICE £145,300 (£155,910 as tested)

POWERTRAIN 4395cc 32v twin-turbo
V8, eight-speed auto, all-wheel drive

PERFORMANCE 626bhp @ 5855rpm,
553lb ft @ 1800rpm, 3.8sec 0-60mph,
155mph

WEIGHT 2510kg

EFFICIENCY 21.3mpg (official), 12mpg
(tested), 300g/km CO2

ON SALE Now

★★★★★

**WATCH
THE VIDEO!**

GET CAR'S
DIGITAL EDITION –
SEE PAGE 82

There's 1795kg
between them,
but only 0.4sec
0-62mph



The light at the end of the tunnel is Ben Oliver. Sorry, make that Geoffrey Bouquot

THE SAVIOUR

Meet the man with a mission that's simple to
sum up but won't be easy to deliver:
make Audi great again

Words Ben Oliver Photography Tom Salt

W

hen Audi CEO Gernot Döllner presented a dispiriting set of sales and financial figures for 2024, there was only one other board member he named. He wasn't leveling blame: the member in question only joined halfway through the

year. At a less formal preview the night before the annual conference, the same board member was the only one to join Döllner on stage. And when I went to Ingolstadt to interview Döllner for this magazine in January, the same guy was there by his side.

Döllner's constant shadow is the 39-year-old Frenchman Geoffrey Bouquot. He joined Audi as board member for Innovation and Software-Defined Vehicles in June last year, before taking Technical Development off Döllner's hands at the start of this year. He's Audi's Chief Technical Officer, basically, and given the transformational importance of his work and the faith that Döllner has placed in him it's little wonder we're seeing so much of him. Audi is only aware of one person being elevated to its board at a younger age, and his name was Ferdinand Piëch.

Bouquot might be destined to run the whole of the Volkswagen Group, but right now his job is to make me a coffee. There isn't time in his schedule to head into downtown Ingolstadt and sit in a cafe so we're having it in the corner office suite he now occupies at Audi HQ. Despite the impressive size of his entourage he makes it himself (well, he puts a capsule in the machine) and apologises for liking it black but long: not very European, he says, and a legacy of years spent studying and working in the US, where his young family still lives.

Bouquot is slightly built, irritatingly good-looking, and favours the uniform of the more confident, creative young execs and designers at car companies: sharp suit, no tie, and sustainable white Veja trainers. Pleasingly, there's a very French Cartier Santos on his wrist, rather than an Apple watch. In a brief, ad-hoc conversation the night before with other journalists he'd been slightly short and scratchy when asked questions he didn't want to answer or felt he'd been asked before. But now, over coffee, with time set aside for a chat and with his PR man listening in, he deals with my questions with the ease, apparent openness and preternatural calm of someone whose mental processing power is barely being troubled by them.

Once, designers and chassis gurus enjoyed a media presence and public awareness which sometimes exceeded their actual significance within their car maker, and often outstripped that of their CEOs. Times change. In the EV age we care a lot more about tech,



With Bouquot's arrival you get the sense of the Audi board hiring a 'young person' to understand all of this for them

from battery chemistry to how quickly and easily the user interface lets you do stuff like flick off the irritating legally-mandated speed-limit bonging. Sometimes, the hiring of a CTO is a big event, like Ford's splashy recruitment of Doug Field, formerly of Apple and Tesla. Any extra exposure the CTOs get over other senior figures within a car maker is entirely commensurate with their importance in this new era of electric and software-defined vehicles. Sometimes you feel like the fortunes of a car company lie more in the hands of the CTO than the CEO, and that's why we wanted to have a coffee with Geoffrey.

He hasn't been hired to fix Audi's present woes, which should begin to ease next year after an unprecedented, two-year, 20-model range renewal which is costing it sales now but will leave it with the freshest line-up of its peer group once complete. It might still be beset by the storms currently raging around all its rivals: stalling demand for EVs, global geopolitical turmoil, regulatory uncertainty, falling demand in China and a deep recession in Germany. But Döllner has a clear long-term plan for a 'fundamental rebuild of the company', regardless of the business weather: reducing committees, flattening hierarchies and rethinking how Audi creates new models, developing them in a 'China-speed' two years rather than the four or five Germany typically takes. The old ways won't work in the future, he told the conference, and Bouquot's job is to change them.

Döllner is no fool, having instigated VW's brilliant and unprecedented deal to use Rivian's electronic architecture when he was group strategy chief: a brave if tacit admission that vast VW couldn't do the job as well as a start-up. But with Bouquot's arrival you get the faintest sense of the Audi board hiring a 'young person' as CTO to understand all of this for them, telling us all about their clever hire, then stepping back from the problem and letting him get on with it.

Perhaps that's unfair, and if anyone can do the job it's Bouquot, who possesses a global-standard intellect. Raised just south of Paris, he studied physics and engineering at two of its most elite universities, the Ecole Polytechnique and the Ecole des Mines, before joining the World Economic Forum's Young Global Leaders programme and studying at two of America's top institutions, the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory at the University of California, and the ►





Clay models a
fully physical
survivor of pre-
digital thinking



Heritage only
one among many
factors driving
Audi today



They do
like a
revolving
door in
the VW
Group

If anyone can re-engineer both Audis and Audi it's Bouquot, who possesses a global-standard intellect

Harvard Kennedy School. While still in his twenties he was the technical advisor to the French Minister of Defence, before becoming CTO at French parts maker Valeo, where he led 20,000 engineers working on everything from EV powertrains to autonomous driving.

This being *CAR* magazine, I obviously want to place him on the car enthusiast spectrum. I wonder if he was a car kid first, or whether tech came first and led him to cars? 'I think it's more the second part,' he admits. 'I'm defining myself more as a car enthusiast right now, and enjoying it more and more, but it's really about how to define the car of the future.'

He had a good start, though. Dad drove a Matra Murena, the mad, mid-engined, fibreglass-bodied, early-'80s French sports car with three seats in a row, and Mum had a late-'90s Mini which young Geoffrey inherited and bombed around Paris in. He's not making full use of his current opportunities though: there's a perfect ur-Quattro in Reception in which we sit for a photo, but he hasn't yet bust one out of the museum to drive.

It's odd to think that the guy now responsible for *Vorsprung durch Technik* wasn't born when Audi's single best-known innovation first hit the road and the rally stage, and it's easy to assume that the advances on which Audi built its reputation decades ago are of little relevance now, especially to a young technocrat like Bouquot. But he sees a clear link between what Audi did in the '80s and what it might become in the future. All-wheel drive might be easier now we have an electric motor on each axle – or even each wheel – but the design, aerodynamics and mass reduction which old Audi championed assume even greater importance in the EV age.

'I guess quattro is the obvious one, but beyond that there's aerodynamics and the design,' he says when asked what Audi's greatest tech hits were. 'You recognise an Audi from the past, right? This is something that is really strong, and aerodynamics is still really dear to our heart right now in the way we conceive the cars. You've seen the new A6, for instance, which is amazing. And so this is part of the core, and so is a very strong attention to lightweight.'

But what specific advances is he working on that we might be able to buy in a year or five? 'This is where we have to decide if we meet again, maybe so that I can tell you more about that. Allow me to stay the cook in the kitchen right now. But the approach is to push every boundary very far. So expect from me that every layer – the chassis, the motor, the dynamics, everything related to energy when we think about batteries, everything that makes an Audi an Audi, they need to continue to be pushed.'

So no detail, then. 'Yes, it's still a little bit theoretical, I understand that,' he laughs. 'But we are BOILING in the kitchen right now.'

Brilliant though he is, we shouldn't expect any individual lightbulb moments from this CTO, nor any radical step changes from the 10,000 engineers he leads. It's difficult to keep Bouquot's answers focused on technology and features of direct relevance to *CAR* readers and Audi buyers. Instead they tend to spiral upwards into corporate abstraction. That's where a brain this size naturally goes, and that's why Audi needs him. His job isn't to re-engineer individual bits of each Audi, but to re-engineer the business to encourage innovation.

It's what he's always done. I ask him about his stint advising the French Minister of Defence. 'It's hard to describe without this James

Bond idea of "I cannot mention much", he laughs, but his work involved high-level military-industrial relations, ensuring that French defence suppliers could make what the French government needed. He was present for, but is careful not to take credit for, the first export sales of Dassault's Rafale fighters and for the merger of Airbus and Safran's space launch operations. Similar at Valeo: he was recruited to encourage innovation, and to produce a culture rather than specific technologies. He's a big-picture person, and Audi and Döllner need him to do the same again.

Unlike Doug Field, Bouquot hasn't worked at one of the Big Tech firms or start-ups which we more usually associate with free-thinking, step-change innovation, and his approach might seem relaxed compared to theirs. But he doesn't think that's how innovation always works.

'We get these cycles of excitement when you see something new and say, yeah, it'll solve my problem,' he tells me. 'No, no, no, no, no. In the end, it's a combination of technologies that gives the best answer. And this is what I really like to do: to bring connections, and to make sure that we think about systems, and systems of systems. Having one promising technology is good, but also we have to build on what we know already. The "big bang" is not the way I see the transformation. It is more like a mutation.'

While proud engineering powerhouses like the German car makers once liked to present their innovations as being entirely their own, even if suppliers did some or all of the work, Audi is now clearly open to working with outside tech firms and acknowledging their contribution. As well as the Rivian deal across the VW Group, Audi has partnered with Huawei for the self-driving tech in its forthcoming, China-only sub-brand. Identifying and partnering with the next hot mobility start-up might soon be as good for the image as inventing stuff yourself.

'Whatever the size of your company, you can bet that there are even more people outside that can help you,' Bouquot says. 'It's very important that we are clear on what we aim at doing internally and how we can partner with the best people on earth to help us to accelerate to the best technological answer.'

I ask him if Audi would work with Huawei outside China, given the fears around the Chinese state having access to the data it processes, and also if he's comfortable with the public profile Audi is giving him. He doesn't need that PR man. In both cases his answer is generous in tone but entirely content-free and, as he intended, not worth repeating in print. On the Audi board before he's 40, entrusted with the future of the company, and with the instincts of a politician, I'm fairly certain this CTO will one day swap the T for an E. **car**



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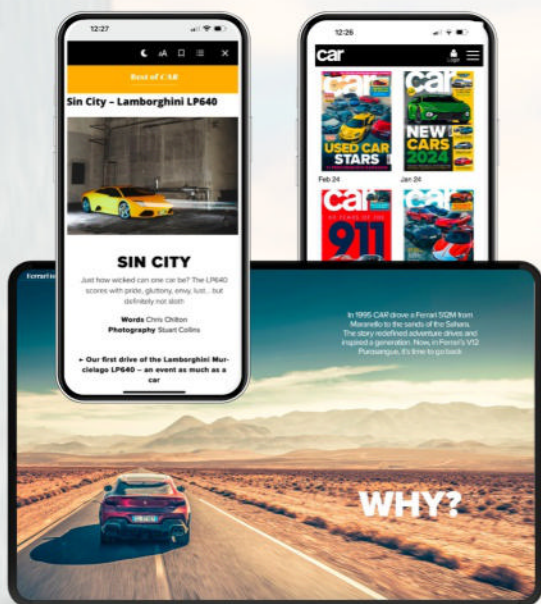


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YET IT?

Five reasons Land Rover is confident it's on to a winner with the hefty new Range Rover Electric, here experienced in prototype form on ice

Words James Dennison

In a faraway land where pigs soar above the clouds, the impending arrival of the all-electric Range Rover is no big deal. It's certainly tempting to retreat into the comforting notion that the whole electric thing is just a passing fad, something for the distant future, and that the LR bit of JLR can avoid the seismic shift Jaguar is currently grappling with.

But no. Pinch yourself and wake up to the brave new world where nothing is sacred. Range Rover may have offered its first plug-in hybrid as far back as 2017, but its debut in full electric – alongside combustion engines, not instead of them – hasn't come a moment too soon, judging from the level of demand claimed by JLR. Even though there has so far been no confirmation of the luxury 4x4 EV's spec or price, the list of seriously interested potential buyers runs to some 60,000 names. First deliveries are expected in 2026.

The company insists this is a Range Rover first and an EV second. Don't they all? It's a bold claim, and one that's difficult to swallow given the way an electric powertrain typically contributes so much less to the character of a car than does a combustion engine. Has this team managed to give this thing a distinctive personality despite the absence of the six- and eight-cylinder engines that do so much to make Range Rovers feel special?

To find out, we visited Arjeplog in Sweden – the mecca of winter automotive testing – for an early preview of the Range Rover Electric, and a ride in a prototype. Here's what we found out.

The engineers reckon the EV is the best version – but petrol and diesel Range Rovers are here to stay

You might be inclined to take the statement with a pinch of salt, but Thomas Müller (executive director of product engineering) and Matt Becker (vehicle engineering director) both reckon the electric Range Rover would be their pick of the line-up. But here's the thing: they don't need all their customers to agree with them.

Early figures suggest that almost 60,000 potential buyers have expressed a firm interest in the new EV, but Range Rover isn't trying to emulate Jaguar and shift its entire customer base over to electric. The current Range Rover (the full-size 4x4, excluding Sport) is averaging around 70,000 sales a year (do the maths on that when the average transactional price is £136k...) and 80 per cent of those customers are based outside of regions facing an impending ban on the sale of new petrol or diesel vehicles.

And given the uncertainty in various countries as politicians rethink the proposed timeline for the transition to electric, that 80 per cent may be a conservative figure.

With that in mind, there's no desperate attempt being made here to rush to EV at any cost. Rather, the all-electric version is going to be introduced as an additional option to complement the existing powertrain line-up.

Müller explains: 'The customer should choose what is the best powertrain for a Range Rover that he or she wants to drive.' That flexibility is good for the customer and good for the company.

But why is EV better, in his view? 'I think that the Range Rover experience is linked to the quietness and refinement, and this matches with EV. When you have the electric powertrain it's extremely quiet because you can do so much more with the drive units. They are so much faster and the capability that the technology brings fits extremely well to the car.' ►

Is 2.8 tonnes on a frozen lake a good idea?

Even the small print is nicely designed





When Matt
Becker says it's
done, it's done



Yes, it still does
all the Land
Rover stuff, even
on regular tyres



2 The Range Rover Electric's design is unchanged inside and out – and that's a very good thing

While we only had access to an engineering prototype version of the Range Rover Electric (complete with a very basic 3D-printed grille), we do know that the finished car will look 99 per cent identical to the petrol and diesel variants inside and out. In fact, were it not for the absence of engine sound giving the game away, you'd be hard pressed to tell the difference.

Müller talks us through the thinking by contrasting it with the attitude of some other manufacturers, who go out of their way to make it obvious at a glance that a new car is electric. 'We said from the very beginning that we're not doing that – people buy a Range Rover because it's a Range Rover. They won't buy a Range Rover because, first of all, it's electric.'

So the electric version will use the same Modular Longitudinal Architecture (MLA) as the petrol and diesel Range Rovers, with production on the same line at the Solihull factory. This will differ from the Electric Modular Architecture (EMA) platform to be used on other future electric members of the Range Rover/Land Rover family (such as the Velar and Discovery Sport), which will be built at the Halewood factory on Merseyside.

3 The all-electric version doesn't weigh *quite* as much as a house

We're riding shotgun with Matt Becker across one of the many frozen lakes at JLR's Arjeplog testing facility. This one has a tight, technical track carved out into its otherwise featureless surface. We're going at quite a lick (on the standard, all-season tyres – no specialist snow rubber here) and the Range Rover Electric is moving quietly and deftly across the ice in a manner that belies its actual weight.

JLR won't officially confirm it, but the Range Rover Electric is likely to weigh in at around 2.8 tonnes – a very similar number to the current mild-hybrid V8. Owing to the positioning of the batteries and EV powertrain, the centre of gravity is around 50-60mm lower and, as Becker explains, this makes a noticeable difference.

'If you've got the roll inertia higher up, then obviously you have to run stiffer anti-roll bars or springs to stop the car from rolling as quickly. In this car we don't. So you'll notice the body control is very Range Rover, but it's nicely composed and the front-to-rear heave motions are well balanced.'

Putting the power down seamlessly out of a tight hairpin corner, Becker explains there's another element to consider with how the ►

**IT'S PULLING MOVES
THAT TORVILL AND DEAN
WOULD BE PROUD OF,
YET NOTHING EVER
FEELS RUSHED OR OUT
OF BALANCE**

Range Rover Electric previewed

car handles an EV powertrain. Because EVs make instant torque, the pitch of the car during heavy acceleration must be carefully managed, hence the switch to dual-rate springs and a modification to the valving within the dampers. New software can get the dampers to respond more quickly when damping force needs adjusting.

It's clearly working, judging from my time in the prototype. The speedo is creeping up and the Range Rover Electric is pulling moves that Torvill and Dean would be proud of, yet nothing ever feels rushed or out of balance. It's a graceful urgency that only the best luxury cars can manage and – as we transition into a long, arcing right-hander with eerie precision – it feels like the responses of the EV powertrain are crucial in delivering this. Everything is smooth and deliberate including the braking that, Becker says, has been developed to complement the electric powertrain. 'We changed the brake pedal characteristics to make sure the driver gets that immediacy in connection and response.' That doesn't, he explains, mean the Range Rover now brakes like a sports car. 'It's still very nice and linear as you go into the pedal, but also a lot more responsive.'

4 They reckon buyers will be happy with a range of around 300 miles from the 117kWh battery

A real-world range of around 300 miles has been the target. This will be made possible by a 117kWh, cell-to-pack (the cells mount directly into the battery, with no intermediary modules, saving weight) battery designed by JLR for high energy density.

A torque figure of 627lb ft is confirmed, with total power at 542bhp. We estimate a 0-62mph time of 4.5 seconds – in line with the V8 Range Rover SV. We're also anticipating a price roughly equal to the current flagship V8, so expect a UK starting figure of around £170k.

5 Dynamic excellence, not following trends in electric 4x4s, has guided the project

Some may have expected the Range Rover Electric to have four electric motors – like the Mercedes G580 – but it in fact has two. Weight saving was a factor, but not the only one.

The thinking is that with a dual-motor configuration, a virtual centre differential can control the front and rear axles independently, while the mechanical differential within each electric drive unit (EDU) can be used to transfer torque from side to side, while simultaneously knowing what each wheel's speed is and managing that to reduce slip or spin. This ability to quickly react to a loss of traction is made possible by the new Integrated Traction Management system that can respond to a slip in just 50 milliseconds – around 100 times faster than the equivalent system on a combustion car.

Lynfel Owen – chief engineer, vehicle architecture – explains that having four independent motors wouldn't make sense. 'Each one would need to be larger than a centre EDU with torque vectoring capability, as each independent wheel would need to generate the full wheel torque required without any vectoring through the centre differential; you wouldn't have a reference speed comparison on the axle, so it would be very hard to deliver control and composure simultaneously in challenging terrain, especially at low speed.' Sounds like the right set of priorities for an EV that's trying to stay true to Range Rover tradition. **car**

No tailpipes, but few other clues it has no engine



There's only so much you can learn on ice. But so far, so good



No, James, if it's
all white then it's
not a pedestrian
crossing





Carrera Catastrophicana

Swapping Mexico for Wales and Norfolk, CAR sets out to prove there is an alternative to the endlessly reliable electric SUV

Words Mark Walton Photography Lee Brimble





Happily, this angle doesn't show quite how rusty the Puma is underneath



We all have our hobbies. Some play golf, others like to garden, some grown men make 16th century galleons out of matchsticks.

My hobby is window shopping for crappy cars on eBay. I don't know why, I just like to idle away the hours looking for all manner of garbage I'll never actually buy. I suppose the entertain-

ment comes from seeing what's out there, feeding my car-nerd imagination. What would it be like to buy a 1995 Mercedes C-Class for £1250? (I don't need one.) Wouldn't it be fun to own an old Fiat Panda? (I'd never drive it.) And would a 170,000-mile Alfa 159 be reliable? (I'd never risk it.)

Ah yes, the crunch issue: reliability. Would that tatty P38 Range Rover with stratospheric mileage and cracked leather seats be reliable? Would the blinking warning lights ruin the experience? Or would the delicious smugness of driving a cheap car bring more pleasure than pain?

Well, CAR decided to find out. What if four of us bought rock-bottom cars from eBay – what would we actually buy, if it wasn't hypothetical but real cash? And after buying our cut-price wheels, who

would regret it first on a road trip? Yes, a competition but not a race – not against each other at least. It's more like we're pitting ourselves against the gods of malfunction, the gremlins of mechanical failure. A kind of Carrera Catastrophicana – a coast-to-coast Cannonballs-Up.

But first, what am I going to buy?

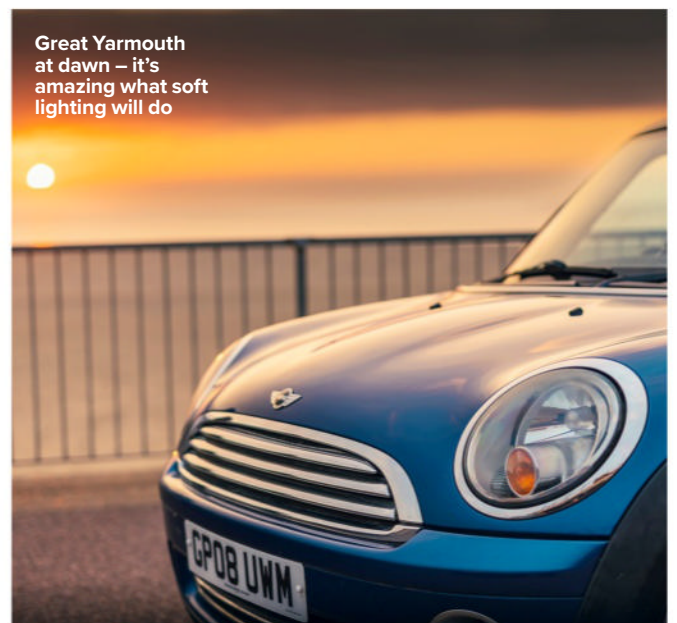
We have a couple of rules for this game: the budget is £1500; the cars have to have an MoT; and they have to be bought via eBay's 'Buy It Now' button, not through an auction. Straight away, my plans to buy something older are dashed. Anything with the word 'classic' in the description is well out of my league – even a tatty 1990 Ford Escort Ghia 1.4 is on eBay for £2895. Dross, but classic dross, apparently.

So I veer towards the executive end of the old-nail market, hoping maybe I can get something plush but unloved. There are lots of Jaguar S- and X-Types for under £2k, but I go bigger and start looking at bottom-of-the-barrel Jag XJs – late '90s, silky straight-six, high miles and high danger. Mmm, I like that. But then – ooh, what's this? A tidy Volvo 740 estate for £1650, maybe they'll accept an offer?

I've never owned a Volvo before, never wanted to either, but suddenly the idea of this old-school Scandi-wagon – blocky like Minecraft, built for a hard winter – seems like exactly the car I need. And when I find the 740 is already sold, the Volvo idea is lodged in my head. So I end up pressing 'Buy It Now' on a 2002 Volvo V70 estate, a 2.4 manual with 143,000 miles on the clock. It's more modern ►



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Great Yarmouth
at dawn – it's
amazing what soft
lighting will do



Puma's low-down torque could easily outdrag the Mini's more revvy lump

The stitching in the seats has gone and there are so many Magic Trees in here it smells worse than a Lush factory

than I'd planned but it's £1495. I'm thrilled. The game is on.

Two weeks later, it's 11pm and I'm cruising across Norfolk in the dark. We've decided our road trip will start at dawn on the east coast, then we'll follow the sun across Britain's belly to see it set on the west coast of Wales. I'm heading for a short night in the Premier Inn, Great Yarmouth, ready for an early start, and I've already fallen head over heels for this old Volvo. Yes, the stitching in the seats has gone and yes, there are so many Magic Trees in here it smells worse than a Lush factory; but my god, the engineering! The 2.4-litre five-cylinder feels muscular and smooth, with a surprisingly exotic five-cylinder warble, and on its fat tyres and cushioned suspension it's like I'm on a lilo, floating down a river of warm caramel. The interior is dimly lit with an old-fashioned, low-wattage glow, and the driver's armchair feels comfortable enough to take me to the Arctic Circle. It feels so functional, so characterful, so Swedish. By the time I check in, I've already decided, I'M KEEPING THIS VOLVO FOREVER.

Next morning we meet at the beach in the pre-dawn light and I find out what else you can buy on eBay for £1500. Straight away, I'm

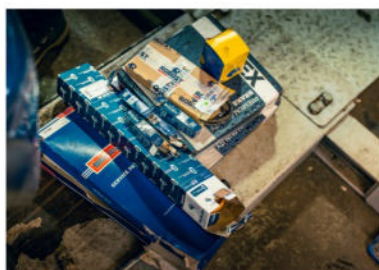
drawn to Colin Overland's Ford Puma, a remarkable, one-owner car with just 36,000 miles on the clock, bought for £1395. 'It's been owned by a woman in St Helens who appears to have barely driven it,' says Colin. A vanguard of Ford's New Edge design of the 1990s, this 2001 example still looks pert and modern 24 years later, and the condition seems amazing. Well, it is if you ignore the rusting arches, a common issue in Pumas. Just close your eyes, step inside and then... open them, to be transported back to 2001. No touchscreens, no cupholders, but still in mint condition.

Next to it is James Dennison's MG TF, which perhaps hasn't aged so well. Launched in 1995 as the MGF, the re-engineered TF came in 2002. This example is from 2003, not long before MG Rover swerved off the road and crashed in a ditch. With a legendary 1.6 K-series engine mounted in the middle and just 65,000 miles on the clock, I should be excited... but I can't help feeling this MG is like a retirement-age gift to yourself. It cost James just £1150 – a sign of how unloved these cars are these days – but Dennison justifies it with passion: 'Where else can you buy a British mid-engined sports car, at any price?' he argues, and we all shrug. 'And in so many modern cars,' he adds, 'you just put your foot down and accelerate to 100mph and barely notice! In this, you can floor it for a good 20 seconds... and you're still only doing 70mph!'

We all shrug again. I think he meant it as a compliment.

The sun is now up and it's time to get going. Rather than return to my Volvo I jump at the chance of driving our fourth car, a 2008 Mini Cooper, bought by Piers Ward for £1400. ►

DO TRY THIS AT HOME



So, £1500. By saving just £28 a week for a year, you too can own the equivalent of one of these high-water marks of automotive history. Even the Mini's half-dozen air fresheners were thrown in for free...

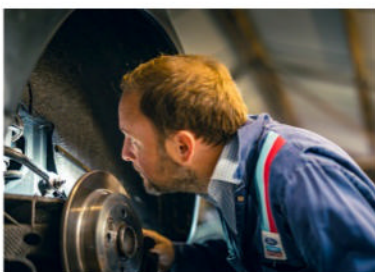
If only it were so simple. Often, the purchase price is just the start. Improvements are needed, sometimes because a part is just old, or other times because the previous owner hasn't lavished enough TLC on a car they use for a three-mile daily trek to the train station.

Part of the plan with our group was to see how easy it is to buy and fit the parts needed. There are myriad places to get these but seeing as we bought all the cars on eBay, the MyGarage bit of the site seemed like a good place to start. Plasters at the

ready in anticipation of many grazed knuckles, it was time to hit the internet.

Brands like Mini, BMW and Toyota have official eBay stores where you can buy direct from the manufacturer. But with the others it was also pretty easy to source the bits we needed, because eBay offers an 'assured fit' programme. Simply type your reg number in and the site should generate bits that'll actually fit. We went for new parts, but cheaper, recycled bits are also available.

It's definitely worth going through the car carefully before you embark on the sort of journey we did. The Puma might have smelt like a new car inside but the tyres were the same set it came with when new in 2001, while the Volvo's cambelt was so



cracked it probably wouldn't have made it as far as Great Yarmouth for the start of our trip, let alone the end. With the Mini, the rear brake sensor had been disconnected and was wrapped around the suspension arm.

In contrast, and much as it pains me to admit it, James Dennison's MG required very little. The previous owner clearly had a passion for the



car, as it came to us with a new stainless steel exhaust, all-new coolant pipes from front to rear, new clutch slave cylinder and sparkling track-rod ends. Even the cambelt seemed to have been done fairly recently. It meant even as he was getting wet in Wales, it was tricky to wipe the smug grin off his face.

PIERS WARD



While the engine isn't powerful, it's exciting when you cane it to 6500rpm. Which I do. A lot. Because it's not my car

It's funny, the BMW Mini is one of those ubiquitous cars you see so often, you almost stop noticing them. But now, really *looking* at it, it's an incredibly compact, minimalist design, with the wheels pushed right out to the corners – and this is a Mk2, 6cm longer than the original 2001 rebirth.

Piers tells me there are loads out there for this kind of money, and it was chosen for sentimental as well as practical reasons: 'I reckoned it was new enough to be reliable,' Piers tells me as he hands over the key. 'But also, I've kind of grown up with this era of Mini and I know they're great fun.'

So I slot the Mini's strange UFO-shaped disc-key-thing into its slot, start the 1.6-litre engine and we're off. The first thing that strikes me is how this 115,000-mile car still feels so tight. The gearbox (the only six-speed in this group) feels clenched, the steering is vividly pointy and direct and while the engine isn't hugely powerful, it's still exciting when you cane it to 6500rpm. Which I do. A lot. Because it's not my car.

The interior has survived well too. There's a dreadful Jelly Belly air freshener and the air-conditioning has packed up, so the ambience is like being trapped inside a strawberry-flavoured sock, but all the fabrics and half-leather seats look clean and firm.

The onboard entertainment does betrays its age, though – forget

CarPlay, it's strictly tape and CD players on this trip. So, bored with listening to local radio, I decide to make a pitstop in Kings Lynn and from a limited selection in a charity shop, I buy Keane and Dido CDs for some authentic mid-2000s pop and – for the Volvo tape player – *An Hour of the Shadows* and *20 Christmas Hits*. Not my first choice... but 50p each.

Halfway across the Fens, Dennison decides he wants to take the hardtop off his MG. We stop and unclip it (easily a four-man task) to reveal an incredibly clean, folded soft-top beneath. Dennison looks very happy now – every car is thrilling when the roof is down, even an MG TF.

It's time for me to have a go in the Puma. 'It's like a new car,' they tell me, but as soon as I get in I discover the charging socket doesn't work. Secondhand cars, eh?

But on the move, the Puma really does feel like it rolled out of the factory last week. The gearbox – famously short-throw and notchy – feels like it belongs in a Caterham Seven and the steering feels so alive and communicative compared to modern cars. And the engine, a lusty 1.6, shames the Mini with the way it pulls hard from low revs. Altogether, I reckon Ford could relaunch this little coupe again next week, brand new, and it would probably win group tests. If they included some USB sockets. And some rust inhibitor.

We stop for lunch and mull over our choices. Overall, they all seem to be doing well, though Colin, fresh from my Volvo, reports a red engine light has come on and the temperature gauge keeps shooting up to volcanic levels. This is a concern – but given that he's here in the Starbucks, telling me, it's clear he paid no attention to the warnings.

Things get worse when we refuel and petrol spills out from under the Volvo, all over the forecourt. There must be a hole in the filler neck somewhere. Suddenly I'm not so sure I want to keep this car. ►



A Welsh B-road is where the MG felt happiest. Until it rained



Ride quality impressive on all; no need for adaptive dampers



Volvo's fuel-flap
DRS only slightly
less effective than
McLaren's



No family should
be without an
MG plate warmer.
Patent pending



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West Wales
doing its best to
demonstrate every
weather system

After the self-consciously styled Mini and Puma interiors, getting in the Volvo is like a design paracetamol

Maybe I'll buy a Puma instead! God, what's wrong with me? This eBay thing is an addiction.

But Colin is complimentary about the Volvo, as he hands back the keys. 'I feel completely at home in it,' he says. 'It's no fun to drive but it's just good to be in. And I like that it's not posh but it is nice... but then, not so nice you'd feel the need to wash it.'

Or pay attention to warning lights, clearly.

After the self-consciously styled Mini and Puma interiors, getting back in the Volvo is like taking a design paracetamol, it's so calm and grown-up in here. Inside and out, the V70 is a tribute to the late, great Peter Horbury, Volvo's design director through the 1990s. I love all the little switches and knobs on the dashboard, feeling their micro-clicks, like tweaking a high-end hi-fi system. Shame I'm almost passing out with the petrol fumes.

By now we're on the border of Wales, though, and as the road starts to twist and turn over the Berwyn mountains, the Volvo's real weakness shows up. Pick up the pace and it handles like a cross-channel ferry, the nose is so heavy and the steering so numb; even the fuel filler cap gives up the struggle against all the *g* and decides to limply flop open at every left-hand bend. Plus, I'm sick to death of listening to the Jackson 5 singing *Santa Claus is Coming to Town*.

It's time to try the MG. If I'm quick, I can get in and out of it before

some threatening clouds burst and force me to test out just how waterproof the canvas roof is. James has packed a dashing pink umbrella which is on standby for if/more-likely-when we can't clip it all back together in time.

Straight away, there's a lot to hate about the TF. Climbing in, it's strangely cramped around the knees and it feels like you're holding the steering wheel in your lap. The interior is ghastly too, with blue inserts and aftermarket heating knobs. Even the stalks are horribly designed – late 1990s Rover Group tat in its dying days. On the move, roof down, it's raucous and noisy and the ride is busy and firm. Worst of all, the engine – that famous K-series, lauded in its day – feels rough and flat. Am I missing something?

But then, as we get deeper into Wales, another side of the MG emerges. Go a little bit quicker and you can actually feel that mid-engined agility start to shine through – the way it turns, the way the steering loads up with authentic weight (unlike electrically assisted modern cars). And the K-series, so uninspiring at low revs, screams with a surprising ferocity when you thrash it mercilessly to the 6750rpm redline. Which I do. A lot. Because it's not my car. It's hard to argue with Dennison's reasoning: what other mid-engined sports car could you buy for £1150?

Soon we're on the west coast and we pull onto Black Rock Sands near Criccieth. We were lucky to have a beautiful clear morning and now, as the sun glows orange, we're on for a beautiful sunset too.

As we eat fish and chips off the back of the MG, we're all impressed (and a little surprised) by our four cars. Yes, we've only done a single journey and it's very early days, but all four cars seem remarkably solid given their mileage and their budget price.

'It's encouraging to think such good cars can be got for such modest money,' says Colin. 'I actually brought a tow rope – not as a ►

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POWERTRAIN 1596cc 16v four-cylinder, five-speed manual, front-wheel drive

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EFFICIENCY 39mpg (official), 39.9mpg (tested); n/a g/km CO2

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VALUE NOW £1500-£7000

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PERFORMANCE 118bhp @ 6000rpm, 118lb ft @ 4250rpm, 9.1sec 0-62mph, 126mph

WEIGHT 1062kg

EFFICIENCY 52mpg (official), 40.4mpg (tested), 129g/km CO2



JUST A FEW OF THE BULLETS WE DODGED

Think of it as the logic of the charity shop. You go in hoping for a Nirvana CD and a pair of brown sandals but you end up with some Duke Ellington and Converse All Stars – not the plan, but good anyway.

Which is how I started off thinking Toyota iQ (but those tatty seats), Honda CRZ (too dented) or Volvo C30 (they just kept getting snapped up) and ended up

with a Ford Puma. I'd enjoyed them back in the day, but this one had implausibly low mileage and a towbar, so there must be a catch.

Like me, James Dennison spotted an incredibly clean-looking MG ZR. 'It's the same model as my racing car, which I don't drive on the road, so that added to the appeal. And then there was

an Alfa GTV, with all its clichés about every petrolhead should always own at least one Alfa.' He stayed in the sporting realm for his eventual choice, the MG TF.

Piers Ward, on the other hand, was thinking big: 'I had a vision of you all sweaty in your small cars and me just cruising along.'

He was eyeing up a BMW 5-series that looked

tidy but at £825 had hidden liability written all over it. An Audi A8 LWB was tempting, but for a couple of electrical issues; easy to gloss over, potentially nightmarish to fix. And then the Mini Cooper spoke to him: 'The Mini relaunch was *the* cultural moment when I was learning to drive so it felt appropriate to opt for one.'

COLIN OVERLAND

2002 VOLVO V70 2.4**PRICE NEW** £25,705**VALUE NOW** £1000-£6000**POWERTRAIN** 2435cc 20v five-cylinder, five-speed manual, front-wheel drive**PERFORMANCE** 138bhp @ 5100rpm, 162lb ft @ 3750rpm, 10.5sec 0-62mph, 127mph**WEIGHT** 1537kg**EFFICIENCY** 31mpg (official), 29.8 (tested), 217g/km CO2**2003 MG TF****PRICE NEW** £15,850**VALUE NOW** £750-£10,000**POWERTRAIN** 1588cc 16v four-cylinder, five-speed manual, rear-wheel drive**PERFORMANCE** 113bhp @ 6250rpm, 106lb ft @ 4700rpm, 9.8sec 0-62mph, 118mph**WEIGHT** 1095kg**EFFICIENCY** 38.2mpg (official), 40mpg (tested); n/a g/km CO2

comedy prop, but because I thought we'd need it.'

So they've all survived, but there's only one clear winner. It's not the Volvo – everyone loves being in it, but with petrol spills and warning lights, no one wants to drive it a moment longer.

It's not the Mini, sensible though that is. 'The Mini is the one that would fit into your life,' says James, summing up its appeal. 'Visibility is amazing, the engine is good, it has enough space – you can see why they're so popular.'

It's not the divisive MG either. 'It's more raucous than I remember,' says Colin, appreciatively, but Piers finds it disappointing: 'It just doesn't excite me enough. And, to me, there's too much of a whiff of British Leyland about it.'

Ah but then there's the Puma. What an amazing little car for under £1500. 'The gearchange is lovely, it handles well – it's just what a lightweight sports cars should be,' says James. 'Yeah, I'd probably have the Puma,' agrees Piers.

And yet... lovely it may be, but when we look underneath, that sur-

face rust around the arches has spread much deeper into the car, and it looks as though this lovely, low-mileage Puma may have one more MoT left in it before the scrap heap. Which is sad, but it kind of sums these cars up. You can fall in love with their character and their value for money, but don't get too attached – at this price, any relationship is bound to be temporary.

'It's a win for the general idea that buying a car in 2025 doesn't have to involve spending £80k on an EV,' says Colin, putting a positive spin on it. 'Spend £1500 on one of these and replace it in a year's time – you'd still be quids in by the day you die.'

That evening I drive home in the Volvo, loving its relaxed vibe. It's a wonderful car – it's not a classic, but it's full of old-school, analogue charm, and it's cheap. Then I fill it up and petrol spills all over the forecourt again. Hmm. Maybe I'll just run it for a while then sell it on eBay and buy something else.

See what I mean? The entertainment comes from seeing what's out there. **car**

Our cars

MAZDA MX-30 MEETS ITS ROTARY ANCESTOR
+ HELLO RENAULT SCENIC + VW XL1 WORSHIPPED





Superb off-road. And good at blocking roads, too

Olgun Kordal

LAND ROVER DEFENDER 130 V8 5.0
MONTH 3

Hello

Rover or Cruiser?

Toyota's added a little Defender magic with its rebooted Land Cruiser. So, which iconic 4x4 does it better? By **Ben Miller**

The story so far

The biggest Defender with the supercharged engine, up against Toyota's resurgent Land Cruiser
+ Special Forces style; syrupy power; gorgeous cabin
- Some aircraft carriers are easier to park – and less thirsty

Logbook

Price £118,235 (£126,310 as tested) **Performance** 4999cc supercharged V8, 493bhp, 5.7sec 0-62mph, 149mph
Efficiency 19.7mpg (official), 17.7mpg (tested), 324g/km CO2
Energy cost 33.0p per mile **Miles this month** 860 **Total miles** 2174

Off-roading in someone else's very valuable car requires a considered blend of aggression and restraint. Go too hard in the wrong places and at best you'll spill your iced latte; at worst you'll need a bin bag for the car's corners and a good story for the insurance paperwork. But fail to go hard enough and you might get stuck, which would be embarrassing in any 4x4, let alone one wearing Land Cruiser or Defender badges.

Water surges over the Defender's bonnet, although we're barely troubling a third of the Defender's maximum 900mm wading depth; the Land Cruiser maxes out at 700mm. As the wade-sensing display assures me there's nothing to worry about, the supercharged V8's thick-milkshake purr turns to a hungover-bear roar and we accelerate so effortlessly that the far bank is blitzed on momentum alone, requiring no additional power whatsoever.

Behind me, like an 'anything you can do, I can do at least as well' shadow I can't lose, the Land Cruiser follows suit, its glaring round headlights (you can spec rectangular ones for a less retro look) piercing the spray. In fact, the Toyota looks so good in my mirrors I can't take my eyes off it, its lantern-jawed, geometric design language looking just perfect now that the car's flanks are caked in mud. For so long a trusted tool, the Land Cruiser's new look has infinitely broadened its appeal.

Which begs the question: what took Toyota so long? Most manufacturers must scratch around in their loft for a car they might, on a good day, get away with describing as an icon. Toyota's been sitting on one for more than half a century. The current Defender, one of at least two icons in the Land Rover stable, has been on sale for five years now, and its popularity shows no sign of waning. JLR can't build them fast enough, and the appeal of a versatile and good-to-drive SUV with the all-terrain capability to breeze any apocalypse is obvious.

Hence the Defender-ification of the Land Cruiser. All Toyota had to do was make it look like a proper Land Cruiser, which it has, while evolving the hardware beneath to give the ladder-framed off-roader more polish on the road.

And you know what? It's worked. Despite some not-messing-about pricing (the ►



'Did you close the cat flap? Tell me you closed the cat flap'

First Edition, like our test car, cost £79,995, and the list price now is £77,845) Toyota was forced to pause sales after the first wave of UK customer deliveries, so strong was demand.

To be clear, though, choosing between this actual Land Cruiser and this actual Land Rover, our long-term test car, is not an £80k dilemma. Yes, you can get a Defender 130 for circa £80k (though we'd go for a D350 110). But you can't get a V8 supercharged Defender 130 like this one for £80k, sadly. The V8 130 is £116k before options.

It's a lot of money, yes. But a 2.7-tonne SUV with the power and torque (493bhp and 450lb ft) to launch 0-62mph in 5.7sec was never going to be cheap (at 10.9sec, the 202bhp, 369lb ft Toyota takes twice as long). But everything else about this Defender makes for a valid comparison, so let's get into it.

Back on the road, water cas-

cading from various orifices like wrecks raised from the sea, these two mud monsters go about things in very different ways. In the Defender you're swaddled in what feels like several hundred of the world's finest duvets. Road and wind noise are all but absent. Despite its chunky design and durable, rubberised finish in places, the Defender's cabin feels and smells expensive. Visibility is superb, adding to the car's relaxing vibe, and the ride comfort is mostly sensational, the big Land Rover gliding over broken tarmac and farm tracks like a four-wheeled hovercraft. Thank its monocoque structure and air suspension.

There are some inspired design features in the Defender's cabin, too. Physical knobs and buttons for the climate control and engine stop/start are a welcome return to common sense, the beautiful multimedia dis-

The Land Rover glides over broken tarmac and farm tracks like a four-wheeled hovercraft

play is lag-free and the rubberised charging pad, which slopes at 45°, is genius, ensuring your phone doesn't slide about and drop off wireless charging as you drive. The Land Cruiser solves the issue with little barriers to stop your phone straying too far. Knocking off the more annoying driving assists is straightforward in both cars.

In contrast to the Defender's refinement the Land Cruiser, with its gruff four-cylinder diesel engine, is loud. That said the driving position is every bit as comfortable and the cabin's similarly unfussy interior design very appealing. There are also niceties like full leather on the comfortable and supportive seats and a head-up display. But

while there's much to like here, you'll need to be a big fan of the noise diesel engines make to be truly happy. The racket is pretty much omnipresent, not least because the eight-speed automatic drops a couple of gears for even the smallest of throttle inputs, rather than using its torque. So it feels like the thing never really settles down, and you pay a price for that chunky styling in wind noise, too. Like the engine, the battle between the Land Cruiser's bluff prow and the onrushing atmosphere is not a quiet one.

The Toyota's ride is fine in isolation but can't compete with the Defender's compliance. Perfectly serviceable on the road at speed, the Land

Defender 130
blots out the
sun but spoils
occupants rotten



Cruiser's suspension struggles with lumpier back roads, town work and sudden ridges. Off-road, it's incapable of making a gravel track feel like anything else, whereas the Land Rover gives the sense of resurfacing it in real time as you pass.

All of which might suggest the Land Cruiser's some ill-mannered 4x4 that should stick to the desert. That really

isn't the case. Yes, it's not as smooth nor as civilised as the Defender, and where long drives in the Land Rover are effortless, the Land Cruiser is tiring over extended periods. But the Toyota's happier on twisting roads thanks to its more sensible dimensions, less terrifying kerbweight (2.3 to 2.5 tonnes, depending on spec) and superior body control.

Up to a point, the Defender's just fine when driven at a clip, gliding through corners and putting a smile on your face every time you add or subtract speed thanks to the gorgeous V8 and Brembos. But hustle and the Defender isn't happy.

The Toyota, meanwhile, feels agile and composed, tracking faithfully into turns with every nudge at the wheel;

its electric power steering is new and, like the ride and engine refinement, is a giant leap over the previous model. It also summons impressive grip from its mixed-surface Geolander rubber. And thanks to that super-sensitive kickdown, the Land Cruiser's off and pulling keenly on corner exit.

If you're really keen to enjoy yourself consider knocking ►



130's hardly tardy mid-corner, particularly in Dynamic mode



off Proactive Driving Assist, an intriguing but distracting system that slows you down for corners, feeling like an EV switching to a higher level of regen, even when you're not using cruise control. It's weird but effective, and you can turn it down or off.

Drive like you left the iron on and the Land Cruiser's fuel economy dips from 29mpg to 26, and the Land Rover's from 21 to 19 – a reminder to choose a more sensible engine.

The off-road ability of this duo is astonishing. Both feature locking diffs, high- and low-range transmissions – selected by button now, rather than Victorian-era handle – and confidence-boosting systems like terrain select, hill-descent control and crawl control.

The Defender may be the most utilitarian car Land Rover makes, but it is no longer a utilitarian car. Neither is the

Land Cruiser in many ways, but it has a charming authenticity to it that fits its rugged good looks perfectly – a mechanical and spiritual honesty you feel you could, over time and road trips and adventures (or more realistically, school runs) fall pretty hard for.

Predictably, both cars are big on space. At 4920mm long, the Toyota feels almost cosy after the stadium-sized 130. But in reality it's ridiculously roomy, with acres of legroom and a 1063-litre boot you'll love stuffing with dogs, camping kit and biscuits. We much prefer the Land Cruiser's power-opening conventional bootlid, too, as opposed to the Defender's macho but cumbersome side-hinged back door.

In its seven- or eight-seat configurations, the vast 130 is the nicest minibus you'll ever sit in. A joy in any one of its three rows, the seven-seat set-

The Land Cruiser has an authenticity to it that fits its rugged good looks perfectly

up makes for a nice gap between the second-row seats, so back-row occupants can slink through without having to fold a seat out of the way first.

This Land Cruiser is yet another example of Toyota getting things very right. Desirable, great looking and crushingly competent off-road, its road manners are night-and-day better than both the Land Cruisers of legend and this model's immediate predecessor. Fun to drive and composed, you could now buy one, never use it off-road and not feel like you'd entirely missed the point. Okay, maybe you'd have missed the point a bit.

But the Defender remains a formidable rival. It's a more

aloof handler than the terrier-like Land Cruiser, if that matters to you, but its layers of additional refinement are hard to argue with, particularly on the kind of long family road trips at which these cars excel. That Toyota diesel engine is just too busy to make a relaxing driving companion. A version of the Hilux pick-up truck's 48-volt hybrid diesel powertrain arrives this year, and might ease the issue by boosting the diesel where it can and smoothing its rougher edges.

It's close, but until then we'll take a Defender, with the V8 petrol engine if we're excessively (and hypothetically) wealthy or the D350 diesel if only moderately so.

Update

MERCEDES-BENZ GLC

Target: 100mpg

Our diesel plug-in hybrid is approaching triple-digit efficiency. By **Ben Barry**

The story so far

Merc's mid-size SUV, here in unusual diesel PHEV form

- + Roomy and well equipped
- Real mpg is good, but official figures seem out of reach

Logbook

Price £61,110 (£61,825 as tested)

Performance 1993cc four-cylinder turbodiesel plus e-motor, 328bhp, 553lb ft **Efficiency** 565.0mpg (official), 96.7mpg plus 3.3 miles per kWh (tested), 11g/km CO2 **Energy cost** 15.2p per mile **Miles this month** 2148 **Total miles** 4575

The trip computer has some fascinating details to share. Of my miles in the GLC, 54 per cent have been done on electricity alone. That translates to 96.7mpg on diesel, a harder-to-fathom 917kWh of electricity consumption and a combined 15.2p per mile based on the not-brilliant 25p per kWh I pay for electricity at home.

The GLC has done just three

big trips from my East Midlands base – home to Cumbria with a few days' local running while I was there, plus one to Oxford and another to Wales.

Those longer trips have added up to about 1200 miles, and those were miles during which there was no plugging in. It's part of the appeal of a plug-in that you have the choice. If you'd rather skip the hanging around at expensive public chargers and instead let the combustion engine do its thing, you can.

When I'm charging at home I'm only using a domestic socket, which takes about a day to charge the 31.2kWh battery. Often local trips are done using only the electric motor, but there are other times when lots of local trips happen in a short space of time and then the diesel has to help. If I had a proper home charger, I'd probably be running on electricity for about

60 per cent of the time.

A plug-in hybrid in EV mode can't offer the punch of most pure electric SUVs – the e-motor alone isn't powerful enough to shift the 2310kg GLC with much vigour. It produces a modest 134bhp and useful-sounding 325lb ft, and it definitely feels more like the former than the latter. And there can be quite a delay before the turbodiesel wakes up to help out with, say, an overtaking move, which isn't great.

Mostly the Merc's relaxed and refined in e-mode. And when diesel and electricity are working in harmony, the performance is agreeably perky. But the transitions could be better, and the regenerative braking could be more natural (though you can switch it off in Sport mode). It automatically brakes the GLC whenever it's approaching other cars, junctions, corners and lower speed

limits, and it feels like I'm driving badly. The logic is often odd – why continue braking once you've slowed to the speed limit in a 30mph zone, for instance? There's a better balance to be struck, methinks.

And I'm no fan of the automatic emergency braking system, which gave me a scare recently. I was in a 30mph zone with no cars ahead or parked at the side of the road but the contrast between sunshine and shadow was extremely pronounced. I think this upset it. First there was a beep and a red flash on the dashboard – not unusual with these systems, but it always gives me a panic because I think I've missed something. The difference this time was the GLC also slammed on the brakes. Thankfully I wasn't being tailgated... but I have developed a not-entirely-irrational fear of shadows as a result.

Back to the future

VW's XL1 was a technical tour de force a decade ago. What impact did it have on today's ID models? By **Tim Pollard**

The story so far

The ID. 7 is VW's best EV yet. This month it meets its muse + XL1 is an exquisite little car – a radical engineering showcase - Tiny hybrid way less practical than our roomy ID. 7 family car

Logbook

Price £51,550 (£55,270 as tested) **Performance** 77kWh battery, e-motor, 282bhp, 6.5sec 0-62mph, 112mph **Efficiency** 4.7 miles per kWh (official), 3.1 (tested), 0g/km CO2 **Range** 393 miles (official), 289 miles (tested) **Energy cost** 8.7p per mile **Miles this month** 1302 **Total miles** 6499

It's easy to forget that Volkswagen sold a mid-engined, carbonfibre-bodied two-seater with gullwing doors and a £99k price tag only a decade ago. And no, it wasn't a slice of supercar exotica, but rather a fuel-saving eco special. The exquisite little XL1 you see here was an extraordinary car that entered low-volume production back in 2013 – paving the way for today's crop of hybrid and electric VWs.

Cast your mind back, pre-Covid, pre-Dieselgate, before Trump and the current financial challenges that have engulfed Volkswagen and Europe's other legacy car makers. Engineering scion Ferdinand Piëch still stalked Wolfsburg's corridors of power in the early Noughties and it was his single-minded product focus that begat cars as extreme as the Bugatti Veyron hypercar at one end of the VW Group empire and this XL1 at the other.

Back in 2002, Piëch surprised

the world when he drove Volkswagen's original '1-litre' concept car to the annual shareholders' meeting, stating the ambition 'to bring a production car to market that is practical for everyday use, yet offers a low fuel consumption of one litre per 100km.' You can only imagine the look on engineers' faces when he slammed down the gauntlet demanding they produce a fully homologated road car capable of achieving 282 miles per gallon.

It was a masterclass in strong leadership: paint the vision for radical change and plot the path to an ambitious destination. A further concept car refined the engineering solution in 2009 and then, two years later, the XL1 production car was born. We've borrowed this immaculate, low-mileage example from Volkswagen UK's heritage fleet to compare it with our 2025 ID. 7. Chalk and cheese? Or is there a valid connection between the two energy misers?

Our modern-day electric car is several sizes along the clothes rail, measuring a limo-like 4961mm to the XL1's diminutive 3888mm city car length. It's a tiny slip of a thing, as low as a supercar (just 1153mm off the tarmac) and absolutely fascinating to look at. Nobody ogles the unassuming ID. 7, but everyone's drawn to the white spaceship from yesteryear.

Aerodynamics is the most common thread binding the two generations: the XL1 is sleek and owes its teardrop ►



Two-seater is smaller in every dimension

Rich Pearce



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THE VIDEO!**

GET CAR'S
DIGITAL EDITION –
SEE PAGE 82



shape to the wind tunnel, boasting a frontal area of 1.5 square metres and an impressively slippery overall drag coefficient of 0.189, enabled by those rear wheel spats, cameras for door mirrors and ultra-skinny, 115-section front tyres. VW claims the XL1 uses 53 per cent less energy than a normal car to drive at a steady 62mph.

The ID. 7 can't quite match those figures, but a 0.23 Cd figure still impresses. As well as extending the claimed electric range of our car to 383 miles, its aerodynamic efficiency brings a hushed refinement to proceedings, with nary a rustle of wind noise in the cabin even at fast motorway speeds.

Look closely and there is some common ground: that fastback profile, the subtlest of ducktail spoilers to manage airflow exiting at the rear and the vents in the front bumper to channel air around the nose and front wheels.

Piëch's obsession with low weight means there's hardly any soundproofing in the XL1. It's nowhere near as refined as our ID. 7, especially when its gravelly engine awakes. This is a plug-in diesel hybrid and the clatter from the 800cc twin is quite shocking after months of driving the all-electric ID. The XL1 betrays its age with a hefty external charging unit, deemed too heavy to package in the bespoke carbonfibre platform. It's downright fiddly compared with the plug-and-play ease of charging a modern ID product.

In the XL you slink down low into offset front Sparco bucket seats, marvelling at the ease of access afforded by the dramatic gullwing doors, which take a large chunk of roof with them as they swoop skywards.

The minimalist interior has heating controls from the early Up, a pleasingly button-free steering wheel and a good old flick key. But what's most strik-

VW claims the XL1 uses 53 per cent less energy than a normal car to drive at a steady 62mph

ing is the sheer quality. I can't quite believe it's so well manufactured. The standard of the exposed carbonfibre weave of the tub, the bodywork and interior fit-and-finish are first rate.

Our ID.7 can easily accommodate four adults and a fifth is no problem, thanks to a totally flat floorpan, while the boot is vast in comparison. I like that it's a hatchback, making loading family paraphernalia or four-legged friends a cinch. Study the arc of the profiles side-by-side and you'll understand that the pioneering aero work of the XL1 is indeed still felt in the packaging and design of today's ID. 7.

Fire up the XL, select D on the gearlever and you pull away using the 103lb ft of torque available from the modest 20kW motor. Despite the looks, this is not a fast car, but its 795kg kerbweight sharpens the handling and means you save energy when you tip-toe on the throttle. Both cars encourage you to drive smoothly and gently, preserving the battery state of charge.

We quickly start racking up extraordinary efficiency figures. Start with a fully charged battery and you'll easily notch up 200mpg driving around town and cross-country. Coast along a straight or down a hill

and you'll feel the low rolling resistance and slippery aero at play. You really do glide through the air. Exceed the e-range of 31 miles and the diesel engine comes into play, but even then we regularly see 80-100mpg.

Combustion is banished from Volkswagen's contemporary ID range, obviously, so there are no direct miles per gallon comparisons to make. But we are averaging somewhere between 3.0 and 3.5 miles per kilowatt hour on most journeys, despite weighing 2.7 times the mass of the XL1. I've lived with EVs long enough to know that the ID. 7's 77kWh battery is plenty big enough for me and range anxiety is pretty much a thing of the past. Mind you, I think the XL1 would work out cheaper on many journeys; I drove it for 10 days and only had to fill up the tiny 10-litre fuel tank once, at a cost of £16.31.

This first encounter with an XL, a dozen years after launch, made a big impression on me. This was surely one of the great eras of innovation at Wolfsburg; I suspect we'll never see its like again. VW should make all today's management spend some time in this low-slung rule-breaker – to rediscover some maverick engineering mojo and prove that impossible goals can indeed be realised.





Aside from a focus on efficiency, little in common



Two bucket seats inside, and a minimalist vibe





SKODA SUPERB MONTH 1

Hello

Lord of the estate

Diesel-powered and big-booted Superb is here to make SUVs look a bit silly. By **Jake Groves**

The story so far

Latest version of Skoda's Superb estate joins the fleet, in a very old-school spec

- + Sensible, spacious and blessed with comfortable seats
- Looks and sounds like a taxi

Logbook

Price £44,140 (£45,430 as tested) **Performance** 1968cc turbodiesel four-cylinder, 190bhp, 7.5sec 0-62mph, 148mph **Efficiency** 46.7mpg (official), 39.6mpg (tested) **Energy cost** 17.0p per mile **Miles this month** 1017 **Total miles** 1086

Jealous colleagues keep telling me I've probably got the best car of the entire CAR long-term test fleet.

Best by what metric, though? It's not the fastest, nor the most efficient. And, well... just look at it. My new Skoda Superb estate, arriving in sensible SE L trim

and finished in grey, looks like something that turns up at 4am to take you to Stansted for your week in Benidorm.

It really isn't anything special to look at, is it? The Superb has always been quietly handsome, but this time around, in its fourth generation, it manages to look a little dowdy.

And yet everyone I've talked to who's remotely interested in cars has responded with some approving noise or other – a 'phwoaaaaa' here and a 'niiiiiice' there – when I've said this is my new car. Supercars? Forget them. But a big diesel estate? Now you're talking. Two of my closest friends, both of whom are fathers with dogs, have never been more interested in a long-term test car I've run.

Given how muddled the car market is at the moment, with everyone electrifying and

crossover SUVs being widely accepted as the default route to sales success, this diesel-powered estate car feels refreshingly simple. Something that we could easily have brushed aside as unambitiously conventional only a few years ago now feels like the interesting alternative.

And, yes, when I say diesel, I mean just that. It's turbo-charged, but with no electrification in sight. Ours is the more powerful of two available in the Superb. It's a neat differentiator from the latest VW Passat, which is only available with petrol or PHEV power. Every Superb is fitted with a dual-clutch transmission that's shifted using a column stalk like those found in VW's ID range of electric cars, and my Superb has all-wheel drive. It'll be interesting to discover whether that's actually worth-

while; it's not as if I intend to go off road.

The car arrived with just 69 miles on the clock, so this month has been spent running it in. For now, I can say that, yep... it sounds like that 4am taxi, with a familiar *dugga-dugga-dugga* soundtrack. But even in these early days, it's clear the Superb is well behaved and offers plenty of welcome torque for effortless cruising.

Superb buyers are faced with a choice of SE, SE L, Sportline and range-topping Laurin & Klement spec. I envy Sportline models their slightly racier bodykit detailing, but there's no denying my SE L is very well equipped. And, because it's a Skoda, plenty of clever details are found inside: umbrellas in the front doors, smart cupholders that allow unscrewing of bottle caps one-handed, even

Rich Pearce

Orton Hall, unfortunately, isn't an optional extra



your own oblong-shaped microfibre screen wiper.

Skoda is making a massive fuss about its 'Smart Dials' – three physical dials that can be programmed with a range of functions. In theory that's the best of all worlds: the versatility of digital and the tactility of physical controls. It'll be inter-

ested to see how much use I actually make of that potential for adaptability.

No need to reserve judgement about one cabin feature: the seats. The dark grey leather feels soft yet durable, and you sink into those bad boys like the recliner chairs you'd want to find in your dream lounge. And

Two close friends – both fathers with dogs – have never been more interested in a car I've run

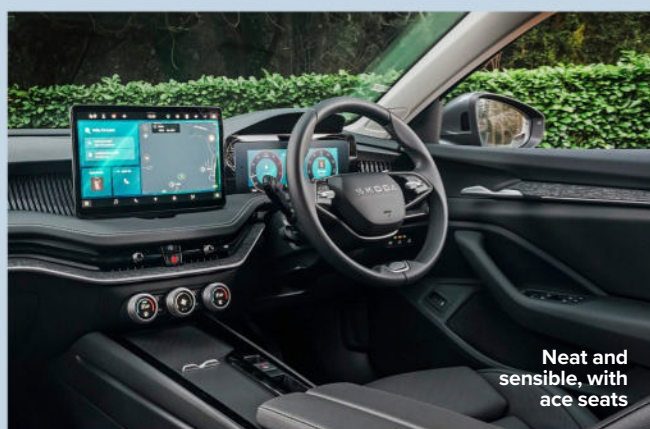
they come with a massaging function. Massaging seats on a Skoda! It's not some piddly moving of the lumbar panel, either; genuine small pads of compressed air move up and down your back with just the right amount of pressure.

And then, of course, there's the utterly palatial space. Skoda has always excelled at this, managing to use shared VW Group hardware in a more family-friendly way. I'm 6ft 2in tall, and there's plenty of room for someone equally tall to sit behind me without feeling like they're being punished.

And the boot! I'm already struggling to figure out what on

Earth I could carry that might stretch it to the limit. That said, I'd have loved a divider like those offered by Volvo; grocery shopping for myself and my partner usually ends up rolling all over the place.

So we've got off on the right foot. Yes, it's completely lacking in cutting-edge innovation, and is clearly no sports car, but speaking as someone who does a lot of miles this seems to be a car that ticks all the most important boxes. The powertrain is ready for long distances, as are the seats, and there's so much space that pre-journey planning ceases to be a headache: just bring everything.



Every day's a cool day

Mazda's no stranger to quirky tech and neat design, as the RX-3 shows. But the MX-30's next-level. By **Mark Walton**

The story so far

The MX-30 says Konnichiwa to a rotary-powered ancestor

+ The MX-30 is certainly smooth, comfortable, fast enough and safe

- If only it had the RX-3's 50-year-old engine

Logbook

Price £33,495 (£35,295 as tested) **Performance** 17.8kWh battery, e-motor plus 830cc rotary engine petrol range-extender, 168bhp, 9.1sec 0-62mph, 87mph **Efficiency** 37.2mpg (official), 27.1mpg (tested), 21g/km CO2 **Energy cost** 22.8p per mile **Miles this month** 852 **Total miles** 6928

Not all rotary engines are born equal. Over the years, there's been the Mazda Cosmo, the OG rotary sports coupe, unveiled in 1964; there was the Le Mans-winning Mazda 787B, with its screaming, four-rotor R26B engine; the 228bhp Renesis engine of the RX-8 coupe from 2003; and there's the tiny tiddler found in our Mazda MX-30, an 830cc, single-rotor range-extender working in conjunction with a modest battery and electric motor.

Given this rich, 60-year history, we thought it would be nice to drive the MX-30 alongside one of our Mazda's rotary ancestors, the RX-3.

This sweet little coupe was part of a whole family of cars dating back to 1971 and it proved to be a huge export success for Mazda. Available as a coupe, saloon and estate, with both Wankel rotary and piston-engine options, over

286,00 examples of the RX-3 were produced during the 1970s – though this combination of rotary engine and coupe body was undoubtedly the star.

Looking like a shrunk-in-the-wash American muscle car, it proved popular in the US and Australia, and was raced with some success too, winning the 1972 Fuji Grand Prix touring car race against Nissan's much more famous Skyline.

This blue example dates from 1973 and it currently belongs to Mazda UK. It's powered by a slightly later rotary engine from an RX-7, so it's not completely original, but the same design of 100bhp, two-rotor 12A Wankel unit was fitted to later RX-3s, so it's no resto-mod travesty.

And it's a lovely car to drive. After you've taken in all that exterior chrome and badging (MAZDA R.E. RX-3 SUPER DELUXE), the cockpit is pure '70s throwback, with ribbed plastic seats, cowled dials and a three-spoke sports steering wheel. It looks and feels so pint-size American, it's like climbing into an episode of *Starsky & Hutch*.

The engine sounds gruff and purposeful when you start up, though a couple of prods of the accelerator reveal the revvy sweetness that all rotary engines have. And on the move, that high-revving willingness dominates everything, as the cabin fills with a rasping, soaring exhaust note, a cross between a Ford Escort rally car and a Vespa scooter. ►

Toby Cornelius



52 years
separate them.
All progress?

Looking like a shrunk-in-the-wash American muscle car, the RX-3 proved popular in the US





Could easily pass for Italian, couldn't it?



The rasping, soaring exhaust note is a cross between an Escort rally car and a Vespa

It's surprisingly quick up to motorway speeds, and with the long-throw five-speed gearbox and unassisted steering, it certainly keeps your hands busy. The whole drivetrain feels vigorous and youthful, and it's only when you get on the spongy, ineffective brakes that your brain lets out a fleeting alarm bell – 'Oh God I'm going too fast!'

This is a 50-year-old classic, after all.

Getting straight out of the classic RX and into the long-term-test MX is a reminder of how safe, comfortable and flabby modern cars are. The MX-30 feels bloated in comparison,

with fat doors and thick A-pillars. There's a faint echo of the RX in the three-spoke steering wheel, but otherwise this is a very different car.

And the drivetrain... Yes – I know: it's a battery car so expectations should be zero, of course. But it does have an engine as well, and Mazda says it designed the system to be more 'emotional'.

At the time of its launch, the assistant manager of Mazda's powertrain development division, Yoshiaki Noguchi, described how the original plan was to run the engine at a constant speed, just like a regular generator.

'But once we started driving prototype versions, we changed this,' he admitted. 'It didn't give a "Mazda" feeling. We decided to vary the engine speed according to driver behaviour.'

So the engine note of the MX-30 range-ender does rise and fall but not in a direct relationship with the throttle.

'It varies as smoothly as possible,' Noguchi explained. 'The curve is more gentle, which also helps with reliability.'

The little engine's revs are trapped between 2000rpm and 4500rpm, where it produces its maximum 74bhp. So this is no howling, ultra-responsive, sporty rotary like the RX-3's. Instead, the motor just does its own thing, often starting up of its own accord, droning away in the background like one of those portable tyre-inflation machines, plugged into the

car's 12-volt socket and locked in the glovebox.

Still, let's not be too harsh. This little rotary engine never actually powers the MX-30 directly, it just charges the battery, so ultimately the MX drives like any other EV.

That means smooth and linear acceleration, and while the car feels much heavier than the featherweight RX-3 (which tips the scales at just 885kg – that's even less than a late-model Lotus Elise, pretty much the benchmark for lightness), the MX-30 is still fun to point and squirt down a country road. And at least it stops like a modern car, with no eye-widening panic.

So not many family characteristics shine through the 50-year interval between these two cars – except Mazda's faith in the quirky Wankel engine.



Success breeds success

Hello

A familiar old name, but how does the new Scenic – now electric and SUV-shaped – stand up in 2025? By **Ben Whitworth**

Toby Cornelius

The story so far

It's electric but that's not the Scenic's defining quality

+ Range; cabin space and style; dynamics; equipment; value
- Brittle ride quality; traction; grabby brakes

Logbook

Price £45,495 (£46,745 as tested) **Performance** 87kWh battery, e-motor, 215bhp, 7.9sec 0-62mph, 105mph **Efficiency** 4.2 miles per kWh (official), 3.5 miles per kWh (tested), 0g/km CO2 **Range** 369 miles (official), 298 miles (tested) **Energy cost** 3.5p per mile **Miles this month** 1587 **Total miles** 1587

Isn't it frustratingly rare to find something that just gets on and does a good job? Which is why living with the Scenic is so satisfying. Early days yet, but its appeal is obvious and straightforward – it's a family car that goes about its business with a competency that is as deep-seated as it is fanfare-free.

Like the 1996 genre-defining original that did so much to take the MPV mainstream, this fifth-gen Scenic also scooped European Car of the Year honours, and joins the 4 and 5 in Renault's recent run of top-drawer models.

The UK line-up is simple. There's the choice of either a 60kWh battery with 158bhp or a long-range version with an 87kWh battery and 215bhp. Both are nickel-manganese-cobalt units from LG. Trim levels start with the Techno, move onto the esprit Alpine and top out with the Epic flagship. The names they chose... You'll need £37,495 for the Techno with standard 60kWh battery, and prices climb to £45,495 for the long-range Epic that we have here on test. Ours has just one option, the black-roofed white metallic paint.

Standout features on the list of standard safety, convenience

and tech equipment are the Solarbay panoramic sunroof that can be opacified in segments; hands-free parking with a 360° 3D camera; a 12-speaker Harman Kardon audio system; full Google integration, and a wealth of driver-assistance systems, easily deactivated.

Renault has focused on range-boosting aero – the 20-inch Oracle alloys, front and rear air curtains, flat floor and flush door handles help the Scenic slice cleanly and quietly through the air – and all models come with a heat pump.

The spacious cabin is swathed in differently textured fabrics and weaves. The boot is a good size, with a deep compartment for charging cables. And so far charging has been straightforward, helped by the way the car, its MyRenault app and my Ohme Home Pro charging unit always sync without any tech issues.

I've been getting well over three miles per kWh, or around 300 miles of use between charges, which I can live with.

It's too soon to be passing judgement on the Scenic's dynamic qualities, but I like the way you can switch between four levels of regenerative braking. And I like the fast steering and low centre of gravity, which contribute to the Scenic being unexpectedly enjoyable on country lanes. That said, the low-speed ride quality is surprisingly brittle and fidgety, and the brake pedal lacks sensitivity; maybe I'll get used to it.

European Car of the Year awards don't always translate into sales success, and not all recipients stand the test of time. Previous recipients have been a very mixed bag, from the Fiat Bravo and NSU Ro 80 to the Ford Escort and Chrysler Horizon. But early signs are that the new Scenic was a good pick.

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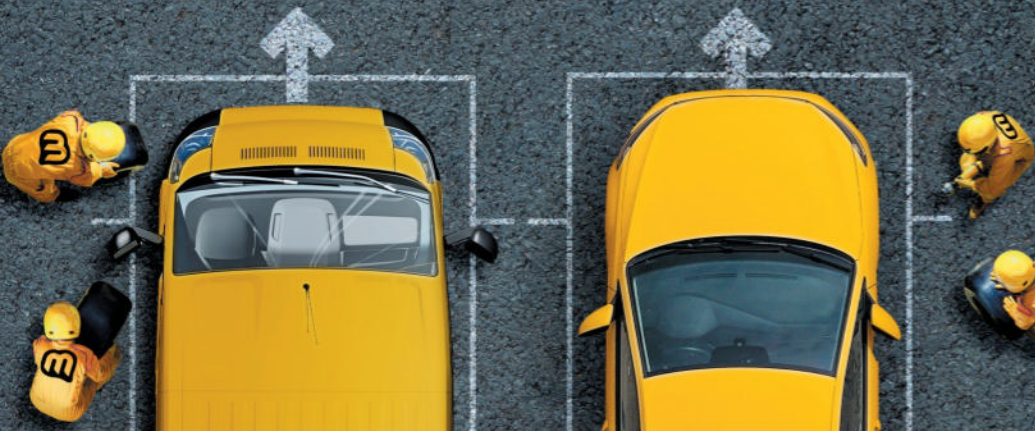
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ML6 AJH	£390	T23 CBW	£290	X006 CAT	£590	D551 DES	£199
EJ AJA	£1500	DI BDA	£490	R50 CAT	£1100	W2 DET	£390
1700 AJO	£490	M00 BDC34	£490	MO0 CAY	£199	DM04 DEJ	£390
N7 AKK	£690	AMII BEC	£390	M21 CBE	£199	V11 DFC	£390
L64 AKS	£490	AM16 BEL	£390	R200 CBL	£199	R18 DFI	£199
LM3 ALC	£390	LC66 BEL	£390	Y60 CBR	£290	SF7 DFI	£290
M065 ALE	£790	M222 BET	£290	V600 CBR	£590	DFK G1	£1300
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X777 ALI	£290	N4 BGC	£190	C9 CDB	£490	A2 DGA	£390
X777 ALI	£290	GI BGC	£290	C9 CDB	£490	T3 DGA	£390
M002 ALK	£590	C8 BGC	£190	M31 CDG	£199	V12 DGI	£199
H19 ALX	£790	R7 BGM	£490	L30 CET	£199	B2 DGT	£590
A21 AMA	£290	B4 BGR	£390	P26 CES	£390	P8 DGH	£390
AM22 AMF	£190	B14 BGS	£290	H8 CET	£590	V4 DGH	£190
X777 AMV	£190	9 BGW	£5900	CPF 848	£790	GI DHH	£199
X777 AMV	£190	H11 BGG	£490	N6 CGD	£290	C5 DHI	£199
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JO1 ANN	£190	L8 BJF	£590	K5 CHD	£590	DIW 91J	£590
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XV61 ANN	£690	L777 BJW	£290	J999 CHL	£390	M1 DJF	£490
Z22 ANR	£390	C7 BLC	£490	DUG6 CHR	£290	M700 DIF	£490
X777 ANR	£390	W45 BWE	£1000	L5 CMN	£290	XK54 DJJ	£490
CT1 AOO	£490	N014 BLD	£199	VW70 CJW	£199	100 DJS	£5880
PIA0S	£990	B11 BLI	£199	S555 CJY	£199	O063 DJW	£199
F15 APB	£590	Y88 BLI	£490	M16 CKJ	£199	D72 6589	£199
A12 ARP	£490	O006 BMC49	£490	J555 CKM	£199	N10 DLB	£199
L400 ARP	£390	H15 BMT	£199	GH17 CKS	£730	L75	
D22 ARL	£390	L007 BWMW49	£490	X50 CMA	£290	N15 DLE	£290
X777 ARS	£490	MFGI BMM	£199	S26 CMC	£490	P395 DLD	£199
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T60 DRO	£390	EM 7497	£2600	AS FMH	£490	H6 GLE	£590	M13 HKE	£190	K33 JEB	£190
M14 DSB	£1900	L18 EMR	£390	X29 FMW	£190	BF GLE	£190	H2 HKL	£290	W22 JED	£190
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W81 DUB	£1900	MI EHN	£990	RI FCR	£890	X13 GLH	£190	HS03 HCS	£190	SW61 JCW	£190
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Y77 DWH	£190	C2 ERT	£990	P26 GAC	£190	N3 GRR	£590	HIU 557	£490	K777 JHB	£190
BI0 DWD	£290	L1 ERT	£290	T3 GA	£190	W6 GRS	£590	27 HXU	£190	B20 JKL	£190
MM05 DWM	£190	BA63 ESY	£150	KC53 GAR	£490	VW66 TGE	£390	627 HWR	£790	K300 JKW	£190
L1 DWN	£1400	ES2 3325	£190	B9 GBT	£390	J77 GTS	£730	666 HXO	£1300	AB55 LB1	£190
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TR7 2332	£190	M03 LEE	£790	Y444 MDM £190	D005 NEL £390	
J810 JSB	£190	L056 LEE	£590	MP04 MEL £590	AO10 NET	£490
M000 JSB	£190	EOI LEH	£290	L8O MEO	£190	CR3 NCG
100 JSD	£190	Y123 KTE	£190	Y123 KTE	Y123 KTE	£190
B7 JTG	£590	Y321 LEN	£290	K90 MEP	£290	TA04 NQO
C2 JTP	£990	M444 LEN £690		J33 MEW	£190	NH9 999
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J465 JUE	£190	A12 LER	£290	CH52 MFI	£199	J777 NJJ
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N37 KEN	£190	MT L70	£190	W01 999	£690	W45 RF
W321 KEN	£790	K444 L0V	£190	KA52 MOM £190		574 RHV
KEN 761	£2800	K700 L0Y	£190	CG51 MON £290		RRN 712
BES6 KER	£190	E5 LPC	£490	HX51 MON £1100		SR2 3056
MU54 KEV £390		R222 LPH	£490	S123 M0X	£190	SUE 521
AK KFA	£190	S4 LPM	£190	MR14 MOZ £290		Y1 2867
100 KFI	£190	Y123 KTE	£190	Y123 KTE	Y123 KTE	£190
JS2 KGS	£190	P4 LSY	£790	M020 MOZ £190		TC1
SH KHA	£490	K5 LTB	£190	J13 MRB	£390	TE2 572
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GBU

HOW DOES GBU WORK?

Our road testers rank the best cars currently available in 12 categories, and highlight the ones to buy

The Good, the Bad & the Ugly: **The Top 5s**

TOP 5 HOT HATCHES



GIANT TEST WINNER



HONDA CIVIC TYPE R

THE GOOD: Feel, feedback, focus: a phenomenal full-sized hot hatch

THE BAD: Now £51,905 for a front-drive hatchback with barely any more power than before

THE UGLY: Probably the last of its kind; good job it's one of the best

THE ONE TO BUY: Just one Type R; £459 a month on a three-year PCP with an £11.7k deposit

...and then drive it to the shops

GIANT TEST WINNER



TOYOTA GR YARIS

THE GOOD: A modern-day rally homologation special that's thrilling to drive

THE BAD: Road noise like a death-metal gig; joke rear seats

THE UGLY: Long waiting list, even with some versions now over £60k, although it starts at £46,045

THE ONE TO BUY: Now has optional auto but go for the manual

GIANT TEST WINNER



VW GOLF R

THE GOOD: Superb Mk8.5 update makes this a seriously good and usefully quick all-rounder

THE BAD: Pity the Mk8 wasn't that already

THE UGLY: Still not quite there with the infotainment

THE ONE TO BUY: Estate is about £1.5k more than the hatch and more practical but not so sharp

GIANT TEST WINNER



AUDI RS3

THE GOOD: Want a five-cylinder hot hatch? Your option is RS3, with five or four doors

THE BAD: Now £60k; small boot for both

THE UGLY: RS is still better, but S3 does a lot for less money and is impressive in its own right

THE ONE TO BUY: £60,105 for the hatch; an extra grand for the saloon



VW GOLF GTI CLUBSPORT

THE GOOD: Rare mix of supreme comfort, hatchback versatility and cornering bite

THE BAD: The stats don't really shine in a 2025 context

THE UGLY: Mk8.5 a definite improvement, but interface still offers plenty to gripe about

THE ONE TO BUY: £42,155 for a very good Golf is pretty decent value

TOP 5 SPORTS CARS



Hybrid GTS
will soon be
joined by new
non-hybrid S

GIANT
TEST
WINNER



PORSCHE 911

THE GOOD: Exquisite blend of power, accuracy, excitement, style and usability, and new GTS integrates hybrid beautifully

THE BAD: You have to look down to #3 in this category to see the affordable performance Porsche; the most basic 911 is now priced in six figures in the UK, at £103,700

THE UGLY: It keeps getting bigger and heavier

THE ONE TO BUY: That basic Carrera is ace, and it's hard to imagine you'll regret it for a minute. But if you want more power and more trickery than Porsche has plenty of ways to take more of your money

GIANT
TEST
WINNER



ARIEL ATOM

THE GOOD:

A beautiful object as well as a thrilling drive; think of it as a modernised Lotus Seven crossed with a high-end sportsbike

THE BAD: You'll need bike-style wet-weather gear if it's raining. And at least £40k – this is an expensive toy, if a captivating one

THE UGLY: The 4R is even more bonkers

THE ONE TO BUY: Do you really need the 350bhp optional power upgrade?

GIANT
TEST
WINNER



PORSCHE 718 CAYMAN/BOXSTER

THE GOOD:

Sublime handling; surprising practicality

THE BAD: Less characterful than an Alpine; a boringly obvious choice (but not one bit boring to drive)

THE UGLY: Flat-four versions sound like a VW Beetle in a duet with Eeyore

THE ONE TO BUY: GT4 RS the most thrilling, Spyder is ace, but flat-six GTS 4.0 is a cut-price GT4 at £75,300

LOTUS EMIRA

THE GOOD:

The first new combustion Lotus in years is fantastically well resolved. Usable, desirable and thrilling

THE BAD: Harder work to live with than a Cayman

THE UGLY: The last petrol Lotus, at least for now – just as the firm gets the bucks to build on its brilliance

THE ONE TO BUY: Recently revised line-up now consists of Turbo SE (AMG four-cylinder) and Toyota-engined V6

ALPINE A110

THE GOOD:

The perfectly formed antidote to a world of excess; a modern classic in every sense of the term

THE BAD: Two boots, neither big, and not much oddment storage inside

THE UGLY: 'R' is 34kg lighter – some effort – but also more than £90k. Too much

THE ONE TO BUY: A110 S adds handling poise for £68,170 but £55,160 base A110 is all you need; enjoy it before it goes electric

TOP 5 GRAND TOURERS



FERRARI ROMA

THE GOOD:

Style, speed and sensuous lines; classic ideas adapted for 2025

THE BAD: If only the roads had classic emptiness

THE UGLY: Baffling steering-wheel touchpads; strangled exhaust note

THE ONE TO BUY:

The cabrio. Arguably even more beautiful to look at from outside



BENTLEY CONTINENTAL GT

THE GOOD: Luxury, power, agility and a great-looking body

THE BAD: Nope, it's really sorted

THE UGLY: Just because it's always been heavy and thirsty won't stop us complaining that it's heavy and thirsty

THE ONE TO BUY:

Plug-in hybrid range-topper is the most powerful Bentley ever, and so much more besides



PORSCHE 911 TURBO

THE GOOD:

Hypercar-bothering pace, any road, any weather

THE BAD: Only fun when you're really going for it

THE UGLY: Turbo has never been good for depreciation; even less so recently

THE ONE TO BUY:

Entry car plenty fast enough but Turbo S outsells it; hybrid update is expected later this year



PORSCHE TAYCAN CROSS TURISMO

THE GOOD:

Raised ride height absolutely monsters lumpy UK roads

THE BAD: Not actually that practical

THE UGLY: Audi's e-Tron GT gets the nicer cockpit

THE ONE TO BUY:

Revised version has arrived, along with revised prices: 4S Cross Turismo is now £99,200, and range hits £165k



ASTON MARTIN DB12

THE GOOD:

Effortlessly beautiful DB11 replacement now has the traction to make the most of the rampant turbo V8's stomp. Excellent interior

THE BAD: Choosing between this and the Vanquish

THE UGLY: Aston simply doesn't do ugly

THE ONE TO BUY:

Coupe is £185k; Volante the stunner

TOP 5 COUPES AND CABRIOS



BMW M2

THE GOOD:

The longitudinal-engined two-door BMW coupe lives

THE BAD: Bigger and heavier than we'd like but outrageous fun

THE UGLY: You need £67k to get involved; steering can feel a shade rubbery

THE ONE TO BUY:

Manual or auto transmission options – get the knob. We'd go M carbon seats, too



MASERATI MC20

THE GOOD: A no-excuses excellent Maserati. Handling and ride to match the looks; a GT as well as a sports car

THE BAD: Throttle could be sharper in normal mode

THE UGLY: Convincing your mates you did mean to buy the Maser and not the 296

THE ONE TO BUY:

The droptop Cielo. All the coupe's go with added style



MERCEDES-AMG SL

THE GOOD: Latest SL was developed by AMG but it's still a cruiser, and all the better for it

THE BAD: Engines are still better than the ride and handling

THE UGLY: Cabin designed by touchpad scattergun

THE ONE TO BUY:

The £153k, 469bhp SL55; also look at the coupe cousin, the AMG GT



MAZDA MX-5

THE GOOD:

Closest thing to a modern-day Lotus Elan; genius folds-flat-in-seconds roof

THE BAD: Lashings of bodyroll; the 1.5 can't climb hills

THE UGLY: If you're over 6ft tall you might not fit, especially in the metal-roofed RF

THE ONE TO BUY:

1.5 starts at £28k, 2.0 in Homura spec brings LSD for £35,515



ASTON MARTIN VANQUISH

THE GOOD: Fast and comfortable, and utterly gorgeous

THE BAD: Gets very thirsty without too much provocation

THE UGLY: DB12 and Vantage are also very good

THE ONE TO BUY:

£333,000 will get you a very fine long, low, two-seat sports car/GT/near-supercar coupe

TOP 5 SUPERCARS



FERRARI 296 GTB

THE GOOD: Timeless styling and a driving experience as good as any of Maranello's finest

THE BAD: You need reflexes like a fighter pilot to drive it as fast as it can go

THE UGLY: Touch-sensitive steering-wheel pads make the interface borderline unusable

THE ONE TO BUY: Fiorano pack is £25k+ overkill. GTS adds sunshine



PORSCHE 911 GT3 RS

THE GOOD: Spine-tlingling sound; 9000rpm redline; total immersion

THE BAD: Nothing to see here

THE UGLY: Getting on the waiting list is like winning both *The X Factor* and *The Apprentice*

THE ONE TO BUY: RS is somehow more focused than the GT3 but more road-compliant at the same time. How do they do it?



LAMBORGHINI REVUELTO

THE GOOD: The monstrous, naturally-aspirated V12 lives on – now e-boosted and wrapped in such a hard-to-crash package insurance should be a tenner. Vastly improved cabin, too

THE BAD: Price has skyrocketed

THE UGLY: EV-only range is six miles

THE ONE TO BUY: There is only one for now



MCLAREN 750S

THE GOOD: Lighter, more powerful, better: evolution of 720S is another corker from Woking

THE BAD: 30 per cent new but you'd struggle to tell

THE UGLY: Convincing your mates you actually bought the new car

THE ONE TO BUY: Stick to the comfort-spec seats and avoid the harnesses on the top 'super carbon' ones



CHEVROLET CORVETTE Z06

THE GOOD: A beautifully balanced performance package that can stand tall among the supercar aristocracy

THE BAD: Interior quality and kit not quite there

THE UGLY: Will future electrification kill the thrill?

THE ONE TO BUY: Add the Z07 pack for upgraded aero, suspension, brakes and wheels; expect to pay £140k

TOP 5 PLUG-IN HYBRIDS



BMW X5 50E

THE GOOD: Massive 67-mile official e-range; horizon-eating performance

THE BAD: Hybrid hardware cuts into boot space to the tune of 150 litres; no seven-seat option

THE UGLY: Not much now that the facelifted 50e model with more e-range and power is here

THE ONE TO BUY: This one, for £82k; it will serve you well



FORD KUGA

THE GOOD: Facelift has brought better efficiency, and it still drives very well

THE BAD: Electric-only range isn't great, although fuel consumption's good

THE UGLY: Not so much ugly as dowdy, particularly the interior – not a patch on the electric Explorer

THE ONE TO BUY: PHEV in ST-Line X trim can be had for £42,565



PORSCHE CAYENNE

THE GOOD: Handling; driver focus; choice of body styles; 0-62mph in 5.0sec

THE BAD: Bigger battery for facelift model but still can't match the X5

THE UGLY: The front passenger touchscreen: £1000 and not needed

THE ONE TO BUY: If you value the U in SUV, avoid the coupe – even if it is a great steer



VOLKSWAGEN TIGUAN

THE GOOD: Mk3 is bigger than ever but still a neat all-round package. Choice of 201 and 268bhp PHEVs, both with 62-mile e-range

THE BAD: Room for improvement with the infotainment

THE UGLY: People are buying Tiguan instead of Golfs, in huge numbers

THE ONE TO BUY: Go for either of the eHybrids in good-value Match trim



BMW 330E

THE GOOD: Goes sub-six to 62mph and up to 41 electric miles on a charge

THE BAD: Engine is slightly coarse; plain 330i is less heavy, more fun

THE UGLY: Hybrid kit eats into boot space so regular 3s are roomier

THE ONE TO BUY: Choice of saloon or estate. Handsome, vaguely affordable 330e Sport Touring is £48,895

TOP 5 ELECTRIC CARS

GIANT
TEST
WINNER



RENAULT 5 E-TECH

THE GOOD: The way it looks, the way it drives, the keen pricing – but it's also refreshingly practical, with five doors, a usable rear bench, and good efficiency, too

THE BAD: Fiddly gear selector stalk; no frunk

THE UGLY: What ugly? Look at it

THE ONE TO BUY: Entry point is £22,995 but we'd splash a few more grand on mid-spec Techno, which gets the '5' charging indicator on the bonnet and other desirable bits of kit, plus the option of the bigger battery, 52 rather than 40kWh

Another month, and still no doubt that this is the best

GIANT
TEST
WINNER



HYUNDAI IONIQ 5 N

THE GOOD: Electric and exciting – synthetic drive modes and gearchange are game changers

THE BAD: Breadth of configurability takes getting used to. Ignore that it's software-driven – it feels real

THE UGLY: Interior quality below par for a £65k car

THE ONE TO BUY: Just one model; paint and a sunroof the only options – all the drive modes are included



PORSCHE TAYCAN

THE GOOD: Totally overhauled but still fast, responsive and fluid; now more efficient

THE BAD: Info screen in front of the passenger is faintly ridiculous

THE UGLY: Prices are all up, and be aware of poor demand for used Taycans

THE ONE TO BUY: Priced from £88,200 for the rear-drive basic Taycan; you can pay a lot more and get a bit more performance



KIA EV3

THE GOOD: Roomy and clever interior; great value for such long range; funky looks – it's a shrunken EV9 or EV6

THE BAD: Air trim feels cheap inside, but only when compared to bigger Kia EVs

THE UGLY: That weird climate-control screen

THE ONE TO BUY: The 270-mile-range car is brilliant value but most will want the longer-range option. GT-Line is our pick for value-to-comfort goodness



RENAULT SCENIC

THE GOOD: Good value; long range; pleasant to drive; looks smart inside and out

THE BAD: Sometimes lumpy ride; poor rear visibility; rear seats don't slide or do other family-friendly tricks

THE UGLY: The boot is very deep, but not actually that big, and you have to pay extra for a variable floor

THE ONE TO BUY: Go for the big battery in Techno trim; your family will thank you

TOP 5 SUVs/CROSSOVERS

Like the 911, every one of the many variants is good



GIANT TEST WINNER



LAND ROVER DEFENDER

THE GOOD: Reboot brings untold dynamic improvements wherever you drive

THE BAD: Second-row access is a pain in the 90; expensive; 130 in particular is very big, so parking can be tricky

THE UGLY: Very nice inside, so you're wary of getting it muddy

THE ONE TO BUY: Range spans 90, 110 and 130 bodies, with significantly different dimensions but remarkably similar character and the genuine off-road ability that Land Rover always delivers so convincingly. Heart says Octa or petrol V8 90, head/wallet say diesel-six D250 110

GIANT TEST WINNER



PORSCHE MACAN

THE GOOD: The new one is electric – and as impressive as the outgoing combustion version

THE BAD: As family transport it has flaws, especially boot space

THE UGLY: Don't want EV? You'll need to be quick (or wait for the rumoured return of engines)

THE ONE TO BUY: EV starts at £68,500 and rises to £96,900 for the Turbo; £71,200 4 offers all you could sensibly want



ASTON MARTIN DBX 707

THE GOOD: Now with a much improved interior, the DBX keeps the glorious noise, masterful balance, rear-axle bias and surprising practicality

THE BAD: High fuel consumption and emissions from the twin-turbo V8

THE UGLY: There's no longer a non-707 version, so you need to pay top dollar

THE ONE TO BUY: The 707 will cost you around £210k



MERCEDES G-CLASS

THE GOOD: Rejigged range spans diesel, petrol, AMG and EV, and they're all good: agile off-road, smooth and comfy on-road

THE BAD: It's all a bit fancy; how do you feel about muddy wellies?

THE UGLY: Merc's premium mission means it's a posh version or nothing

THE ONE TO BUY: Electric is astonishingly good, but expensive at £154,870 (although the AMG's more)



INEOS QUARTER-MASTER

THE GOOD: Pick-up version of the Grenadier has a long wheelbase that if anything improves the handling

THE BAD: Not very roomy for passengers

THE UGLY: Isuzus are much cheaper, if far less cool

THE ONE TO BUY: Prices start at £66k, but a Trialmaster edition at £74k brings together a practical and good-looking set of extras

TOP 5 LUXURY CARS



RANGE ROVER

THE GOOD:

Masterful and hugely desirable reinvention of an icon. An EV version is almost here

THE BAD:

Reliability remains a worry. EV likely to be extremely heavy

THE UGLY: The D350 mild-hybrid straight-six diesel is sublime. Can you live with the guilt?

THE ONE TO BUY:

The above (from £108,555), though the V8 is fun



ROLLS-ROYCE PHANTOM

THE GOOD:

Money-no-object pinnacle of serenity and craftsmanship

THE BAD:

Is this really you? And is this really appropriate in 2025?

THE UGLY: Filthy-money associations

THE ONE TO BUY:

It's 'standard' or long-wheelbase, from £380k. All cars are built to order and most owners spend £500k



BENTLEY FLYING SPUR

THE GOOD: Now a hybrid V8, the Spur has great performance and poise plus decent e-range

THE BAD: Other VW Group cars get even smarter chassis tech

THE UGLY: Lots of emphasis on expensive options, so brace your credit card

THE ONE TO BUY:

Go for the Speed, from £226,500



MERCEDES S-CLASS

THE GOOD: Tech-fest with timeless waftability. Few cars are more calming

THE BAD: Surprisingly unrefined petrol six; doesn't ride as well as it should

THE UGLY: Trying not to crash while using the Hyperscreen

THE ONE TO BUY:

Hybrid 580e works best. That's £119,370 in entry AMG Line Premium



ROLLS-ROYCE SPECTRE

THE GOOD: A joy to drive, and exquisitely built

THE BAD: Efficiency not great

THE UGLY:

Fabulous detailing and engineering will benefit so few

THE ONE TO BUY:

New Black Badge version keeps what's good about the regular Spectre but adds an extra level of dynamism. Also, of course, a bit more expense

TOP 5 FAMILY CARS



BMW 3-SERIES

THE GOOD:

On-the-deck driving position; dreamy handling balance; slick interior; 50 years on, a brilliant car to drive and live with

THE BAD: Knowing you've made the obvious choice

THE UGLY: You'll need an M340i or M340d for six cylinders

THE ONE TO BUY:

330e if you want a hybrid; 320i if you're on a budget



BMW 5-SERIES

THE GOOD: Much has changed; still great. Handling defines the class

THE BAD: It's now a very hefty car

THE UGLY: Is nowhere safe? Even the tradition-embracing 5-series gets a full EV option in the form of the i5

THE ONE TO BUY:

Prices start at £52,175 for the 520i but can easily exceed £80k (and the M5's well into six figures)



DACIA JOGGER

THE GOOD: Seven seats; massive boot with the rear row removed; prices start at £18,970

THE BAD: Sandero base means it's a bit narrow; spartan

THE UGLY: Low Euro NCAP score, although it's pretty safe in a crash

THE ONE TO BUY:

Hybrid usefully punchier than petrol, but much clunkier. PCP a steal at £187 a month



VOLKSWAGEN ID. 7

THE GOOD: The most coherent ID to date now in a choice of hatch and estate. Not posh, but highly agreeable

THE BAD: Frumpy styling and that still sub-par interface

THE UGLY: So few electric estates to choose from

THE ONE TO BUY:

Pro Match with 77kWh battery does the job just fine, priced from £51,005 for the hatch



AUDI A6 E-TRON

THE GOOD: Electric saloon and estate is refined, quick and pretty sharp, with a typically smart cabin and decent range

THE BAD: Rear passenger room isn't great

THE UGLY: Audi's constant model name changes are just confusing

THE ONE TO BUY:

Go for the £70,715 rear-wheel-drive A6 e-Tron Sport Performance

TOP 5 FAMILY HATCHES



BMW 1-SERIES

THE GOOD:

Premium and practical, and a lot more normal than the original 1-series

THE BAD: Actually a bit too normal for some tastes

THE UGLY: Facelift has dialled down the ugly, thankfully

THE ONE TO BUY: £31,875 mild-hybrid front-drive 120 or £43,740 all-wheel-drive 296bhp M135; both good, if a bit much for some tastes



PEUGEOT 208

THE GOOD: Style; big-car character; knockout interior; EV version available

THE BAD: So-so handling; a squash for adult rear-seat passengers

THE UGLY: Dumping the wheel in your lap like a TV dinner to see the dials clearly

THE ONE TO BUY: From £24,155, but £26,305 GT is worth saving up for. Bright colour is best

GIANT TEST WINNER



MINI COUNTRYMAN

THE GOOD:

Wonderful interior and all-round feelgood factor from the big five-door

THE BAD: You need to be in the mood for the built-in zaniness

THE UGLY: Options can send the price into the stratosphere

THE ONE TO BUY: Your basic Countryman C Classic is just fine at a sniff over £29,100



VOLKSWAGEN GOLF

THE GOOD:

Brain-out default choice still a solid all-rounder; ride, visibility, roominess

THE BAD: Seat Leon a very similar package for a lower price

THE UGLY: Revised Mk8.5 version just a bit better, especially the infotainment

THE ONE TO BUY: 1.5 TSI 150 Match at £29,325; roomy estate is also great value

NEW ENTRY



FIAT GRANDE PANDA

THE GOOD:

Remarkably roomy, keenly priced, charming and useful

THE BAD: Not the sharpest or quickest

THE UGLY: Everything looks a little plain next to a Renault 5

THE ONE TO BUY: £21k entry point or £24k for the better-kitted posh version; EV for now, hybrid will follow

TOP 5 SPORTS SALOONS

GIANT TEST WINNER



BMW M3

THE GOOD: Mighty straight-six; front axle's never-give-up attitude; dreamy chassis balance

THE BAD: No manual; nearly 911 money now

THE UGLY: M3 Touring £89,435; saloon is £87,205 – both quite steep

THE ONE TO BUY: The CS, if you were lucky enough to bag one of the 100 brought here. Used Touring is a good secondhand buy



MERCEDES-AMG S63

THE GOOD: V8 plus e-motor shows AMG can do a great performance hybrid, and in the most unlikely of places: a huge luxury saloon

THE BAD: Boot size suffers, and ride quality isn't perfect

THE UGLY: It's a pity this approach wasn't applied to the latest C63

THE ONE TO BUY: Two versions, both £193,525, one with more black trim

GIANT TEST WINNER



BMW M5

THE GOOD: Very rapid, ridiculously agile and refreshingly low on emissions; a clever reboot in PHEV form

THE BAD: Lots of modes, and an odd amount of wind noise; more divisive than previous M5s

THE UGLY: Heavy and expensive, so it's not *that* clever

THE ONE TO BUY: £113,405 for the Touring; £2k less for the saloon



ALFA GIULIA QUADRIFOGLIO

THE GOOD:

Charisma in spades, fantastic agility and almost as good as an M3 to drive

THE BAD: Emphasis on *almost* as good as an M3 to drive

THE UGLY: Flaky interior quality; infotainment still lags behind the best

THE ONE TO BUY: There's just the one, wonderful, model from £86,885



PORSCHE PANAMERA

THE GOOD: New version builds on success of the very fine model it replaces

THE BAD: Barely a saloon – four-up is okay, but forget five

THE UGLY: Estate version is no longer available, even though it was the best looker

THE ONE TO BUY: £89,400 gets you in; Turbo E-Hybrid at £151,500 now tops the range

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NEW TAVASCAN

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CUPRA

For the daring few. The new CUPRA Tavascan is here to redefine performance with its bold, unconventional design and state-of-the-art technology. Our first all-electric SUV coupé, crafted for those who defy the ordinary.

Maximum range on a full charge for a CUPRA Tavascan is 298.9 - 353.6 miles (official test WLTP figures) depending on the trim. Official fuel consumption for the Tavascan mpg (litres/100km) combined: N/A. Combined CO₂ emissions: 0g/km. Test data obtained under standardised conditions after the battery had been fully charged (to 100%). The Tavascan is a battery electric vehicle requiring mains electricity for charging. Figures shown are for comparability purposes and may vary by trim. Only compare fuel consumption, CO₂ and electric range figures with other vehicles tested to the same technical procedures. These figures may not reflect real life driving results, which will depend upon a number of factors including the starting charge of the battery, accessories fitted (post-registration), variations in weather, driving styles, route conditions, speed, vehicle and battery age and vehicle load. Zero emissions while driving. Data correct at December 2024.